MEET THE NEW GUYS

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MITCH MARNER

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JONATHAN TOEWS JOHN GIBSON BRENT BURNS K'ANDRE MILLER + MORE

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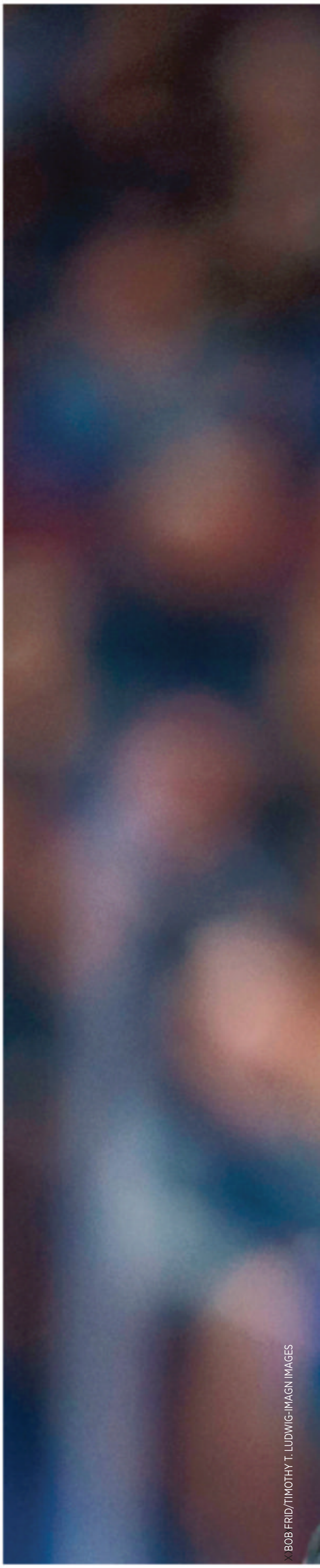

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FINALLY BACK, FINALLY HOME

STEVEN ELLIS/THE HOCKEY NEWS

THE FINAL DAY OF 2025 is going to be a weird one. Because on Dec. 31, the Winnipeg Jets visit the Detroit Red Wings, representing the first time in history that Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews could face each other in opposite uniforms in an NHL game. Both future Hall of Famers, of course, made their names with the Chicago Blackhawks, back when the team was a dynasty instead of a doormat.

Recently, Kane has been plying his trade with another Original Six team in Detroit, where the Red Wings are hoping to get back into the playoffs but still haven't quite figured out the formula just yet. In Winnipeg, the Jets have no problem with finding a post-season berth – the team is coming off winning the Presidents' Trophy, after all – but they'd love to go further. All the way, in fact.

As Ken Campbell writes on page 40, Toews could be a principal driver in that respect. True, 'Captain Serious' hasn't played an NHL game since April 2023 due to Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS) and long COVID, but he's going to make a go of it, and that's wonderful news in these corners.

The NHL is not lacking for star power these days. But having Toews back in the league, for as long as we get him, is a nice thing. In terms of leadership and high-end play, he was close to Sidney Crosby territory during his peak. And if we've learned anything from Sid, who has posted three 90-point seasons in a row in his late thirties, legends tend to age differently.

Now, Toews is fighting through some excruciating health barriers, as Campbell notes in his story, so expectations should be a little more muted. Nobody is expecting a return to the player he was at his peak, when he put up nearly a point per game. But in Winnipeg, he doesn't have to be. Scoring in bunches is the job of Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor. What Toews, now 37, brings is center depth behind Scheifele and Adam Lowry. Toews also brings three Stanley Cup rings, which doubles the number on the Jets right now (Luke Schenn has two; Tanner Pearson has one).

Just as importantly, perhaps, is that Toews chose his hometown of Winnipeg. It's no secret the Manitoba metropolis has not been a destination for free agents over the years, so the opportunity to have one of the best players of this century (i.e., the 2000s) wearing the uniform is a great one for the Jets – and especially fun for their fans. And imagine if Toews can once again harness the playoff magic he had as a member of the Blackhawks. Winnipeg might have fallen short in the post-season this past spring, but the Jets are still going to be a handful in the West and could very well make a deep run in 2025-26.

As for teams around the rest of the league, they'll be countering with new weapons of their own. In this issue, we focus on those fresh faces. Perhaps Kane will be back in the playoffs with Detroit now that the Red Wings are employing John Gibson (page 54) in net. And maybe Winnipeg has to get through Vegas and its new superstar, Mitch Marner (page 36), to get to the Cup final.

At this point, every NHL franchise can have some hope, though some are in more realistic positions for success than others. That's where our Winners and Losers (page 30) come to the fore. And for the record, we're really hoping we're not right about Buffalo suffering again, as Sabres fans have done quite enough of that in the past decade-plus. H

Ryan Kennedy
Editor in chief
X @THNRyanKennedy

[PUBLISHER'S NOTE]

WITH W. GRAEME ROUSTAN | LINKEDIN.COM/IN/ROUSTAN

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

TRUE LOVE

IT IS MONDAY (LABOUR DAY), Sept. 1, 2025 at 10:00 p.m. EDT, and I just now signed the signature page of the agreement to acquire True Hockey, True Lacrosse and True Baseball, all under the banner of True Sports. I have to admit that I am a tad overwhelmed as I digest that I just signed the deal to acquire the most exciting hockey brand in the world, in my (experienced) opinion.

As most of you know, since you are loyal readers of The Hockey News, I have a long history of owning hockey and sports-related companies in my career. For those of you who don't, I have been an owner of Bauer Hockey, Cascade Lacrosse, Mission-Itech and Maverik Lacrosse. I am the current owner of Christian Hockey, Northland Hockey, McKenney Hockey, McKenney Lacrosse and a few other sports-equipment and media companies.

True Hockey is such an exciting company and brand, primarily because of its history of entrepreneurial founders. Thanks to two entrepreneurs, more than 85 percent of NHL goalies wear True equipment and more than 50 percent of NHL goalies wear True skates.

Michel Lefebvre is Quebec hockey royalty when it comes to making goalie equipment for NHL goalies, dating back more than 50 years to 1967. He is the pioneer entrepreneur who is partly responsible for the on-ice success of hundreds of professional goalies around the world, many of whom are Hall of Fame goalies. I remember when I was the chairman of Bauer, talking about him and just knowing that our Bauer gear didn't match up to what he was producing.

Scott Van Horne is the Winnipeg boy-wonder entrepreneur who decided that a better skate could be made, so he went out against all odds and beat out Bauer and CCM for professional-custom-skate dominance. The guy is the ultimate entrepreneur genius, which is contagious because his entire team in Winnipeg is cut from the same cloth.

These two entrepreneurs are surrounded by more than 100 other employees who share the same passion that Michel, Scott and I have for the game of hockey and the True Hockey brand.

My love of the game of hockey started when I was first taken out onto the ice in Sherbrooke, Que., by my mom when I was two years old. I just fell in love with the game, and it has only grown stronger over my life. It has been the one consistent joy throughout my life and has helped me get through some of the toughest times, the most difficult of which was the passing of my mom in March 2022.

It was fitting that the deal was signed on Labour Day, as it was by far the most labor-intensive deal that I have ever worked on. To give you some context, the entire Bauer process took approximately five months from the time I signed the non-disclosure agreement until signing a definitive agreement. In the case of this deal to acquire True, I signed the NDA on Aug. 7, 2024, and here we are just shy of 13 months later, signing the definitive purchase agreement.

True Hockey is by far the No. 1 equipment brand worn by goalies in the NHL and is the equipment of choice by many NHL forwards and defensemen across the NHL. My plan is to expand its presence in the NHL and throughout hockey leagues around the world. I have a couple of surprises up my sleeve, which I cannot share with you because I don't want Bauer or CCM to know too far in advance what my plans are to come after their market share. I also acquired True Lacrosse and True Baseball and will be launching new products for those two sports in 2026.

PHOTO BY WASHINGTON TALENT AGENCY

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W. Graeme Roustan
THE FUTURE HAS ARRIVED

True Hockey has a factory in Terrebonne, Que., making goalie equipment and a factory in Winnipeg that makes skates. I will be adding these two factories with my existing two factories, one in Brantford, Ont., that makes hockey sticks and my Scarborough, Ont.. factory that makes hockey and lacrosse equipment under the McKenney brand. In total, that makes four factories in Canada that make all kinds of hockey, lacrosse and baseball equipment. Four factories in Canada, supporting over 100 skilled manufacturing jobs. My mom is looking down from heaven, and she is smiling as she worked in a factory while raising four children on her own.

The first Monday of each September is Labour Day, a day set aside each year in Canada and the U.S. to honor working people in Canada and the U.S. How fitting is it that I signed the agreement to acquire True Sports on a day set aside to honor working people? It is an honor and a privilege to be able to be a teammate of all of the working people at True Hockey who have made the brand what it is today, the No. 1 goalie brand in the NHL.

I wish to thank all of the people involved in the sale process, the True management and their teammates across the world who have bestowed upon me the opportunity to be the next steward of the True brand and business. Many of the True employees already know me, and for those who do not, they should know one thing about me, and that is: hockey is my true love. H

W. Graeme Roustan

W. Graeme Roustan
Executive Chairman & Publisher,
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BUZZ

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ÉTATS-UNIS
NATIONS
CANADA
NATIONS FACE-OFF
2025
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CA
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Walsh, pictured alongside Bettman, believes the new CBA agreement makes sense for both sides.

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

NHL

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

Many modifications are on the way this season and next after the NHL and NHLPA ratified a new CBA **BY JARED CLINTON**

AT THE TIME, THE "$18 Million Over The Cap" shirt Nikita Kucherov wore during Tampa Bay's 2021 Stanley Cup victory parade was a way for the Lightning superstar to taunt and tease those who took umbrage with the, ahem, creative accounting that helped the Bolts ice a star-studded roster.

Now, Kucherov's tee stands to become a collector's item that harkens back to a soon-to-be bygone era in NHL history.

This comes in the wake of the NHL and NHLPA ratifying a four-year collective bargaining agreement. Elements of the new CBA will kick in beginning this season, and the full agreement runs from 2026-27 through 2029-30. "We can all look forward to five more years of labor peace and of the Players' Association and the NHL working together," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman told reporters in late June. "While we didn't agree on everything, we had a very constructive, professional and collaborative collective bargaining process…I think we identified the issues that were important to both sides."

As with each new CBA, the issues covered under the agreement are wide-ranging.

Included in the new agreement are increases to the minimum salary and the value of entry-level contracts. The NHL schedule will expand to 84 games, while the pre-season will be reduced to a maximum of four outings. Mandatory neck protection is on its way for all players who debut after the start of 2026-27. And the beloved EBUGs – the Joe Schmoes – are on their way out. Each team will now employ a league-approved emergency-backup goalie.

The new CBA also confirms the long-speculated return of NHL players to the Olympics. What will be music to the ears of hockey fans the world over, too, is that the agreement not only allows players to compete in 2026 in Milan but also 2030, when the Olympics take place in the French Alps.

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FINLAND
4 NATIONS FACE-OFF 2025
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KIM KLEMENT-USA TODAY SPORTS

Among all the notable changes, however, those that will have the most impact on league operations and the NHL's landscape are the measures aimed at clamping down on some long-standing – and in some cases, controversial – salary-cap loopholes. Chief among those is the introduction of a post-season spending limit, which will come into effect for this season.

Under the terms of the new CBA, playoff teams must submit an 18-skater, two-goaltender roster no later than 3 p.m. local time or five hours prior – whichever comes first – to their first post-season game. The same rules would apply for any subsequent playoff outing where a roster change is made. More importantly, that 20-player squad must be compliant with a given season's salary cap. Under the current CBA, teams were allowed to ice playoff rosters that would have exceeded the cap during the regular season.

The post-season cap will effectively end the practice of teams using long-term injured reserve and the associated cap relief to bolster their rosters.

Though Tampa Bay's 2021 Cup-winning outfit became the poster child for gaming the LTIR system – Kucherov missed the entire regular season but suited up for Game 1 of the playoffs – it is perhaps unfair to single out the Lightning. After all, the practice dates back more than a decade. In 2014-15, the Chicago Blackhawks placed Patrick Kane on LTIR, allowing them to add Antoine Vermette at the trade deadline, only for Kane to return to Chicago's lineup to start the playoffs. That Blackhawks team, which defeated the Lightning in the 2015 final, began a trend that has caught on since. Beyond Tampa Bay, the 2023 Vegas Golden Knights and 2025 Florida Panthers notably leveraged LTIR cap relief prior to their title-winning playoff runs.

Worth noting, however, is that the new CBA includes a provision that might mean further revisions to the rules pertaining to post-season spending. The original memorandum of understanding between the NHL and NHLPA outlined that the playoff cap would be reviewed following 2026-27, and alterations could be made should either the NHL or NHLPA see fit to seek changes.

While much of the attention is on putting an end to potential post-season LTIR abuse, that isn't the only way in which the new CBA will crack down on potential methods of cap circumvention.

In recent years, the trade deadline has seen a spate of three-team swaps wherein salary is retained twice in one transaction, essentially allowing the acquiring club to land a player at one-quarter of his cap hit. But starting this season, a player involved in a retained-salary trade will have to be on a roster for 75 days before becoming eligible to have salary retained in any subsequent transaction.

Further, the new CBA will stamp out so-called paper transactions. These moves, which see players shuffled from big-league rosters to minor-league squads on off days, are used to accrue cost savings over the course of the season. However, it's become accepted that the players who are sent to the AHL in such transactions only to be recalled by the next game day don't actually leave the NHL club. But under the terms of the new agreement, any player demoted to the minor leagues will be required to play at least one game before they are eligible for a return to NHL action.

The NHL and NHLPA have also agreed to put the brakes on a few contentious contract mechanisms. As of September 2025, no longer will a team and player be eligible to agree to a deferred compensation structure. Deals such as those signed last summer by Jaccob Slavin and Seth Jarvis with Carolina will be illegal under the new CBA. And come September 2026, a team will no longer be allowed to sign a player to a contract that pays more than 60 percent of the total salary in signing bonuses. Likewise, the year-over-year variability of contracts will no longer be allowed to exceed 20 percent, down from its current rate of 25 percent.

It's not just the potential structure of contracts changing, either. The CBA will also result in shorter term lengths on new contracts. At present, a club can re-sign its own free agent – restricted or unrestricted – to an eight-year pact, whereas a UFA signing with a new team can sign a contract with a maximum seven-year term. Under the new agreement, and as of September 2026, the maximum term lengths will be reduced by one year in both cases.

Paired with the previously announced increases to the salary cap, the new CBA stands to impact team building in new ways. And while it could in some instances make life a little more difficult for GMs, the give and take between the NHL and the NHLPA ensures that there will be no strikes or lockouts in the foreseeable future. "This CBA shows what can be accomplished when the NHL and the union work together – an agreement that will allow for the continued worldwide growth of the game," NHLPA executive director Marty Walsh said. "That is a win for everyone." H

SUDDENLY FIT FOR STANLEY
No longer will teams be able to stash players on LTIR for the playoffs, like the Bolts did with Kucherov in 2021.

TR

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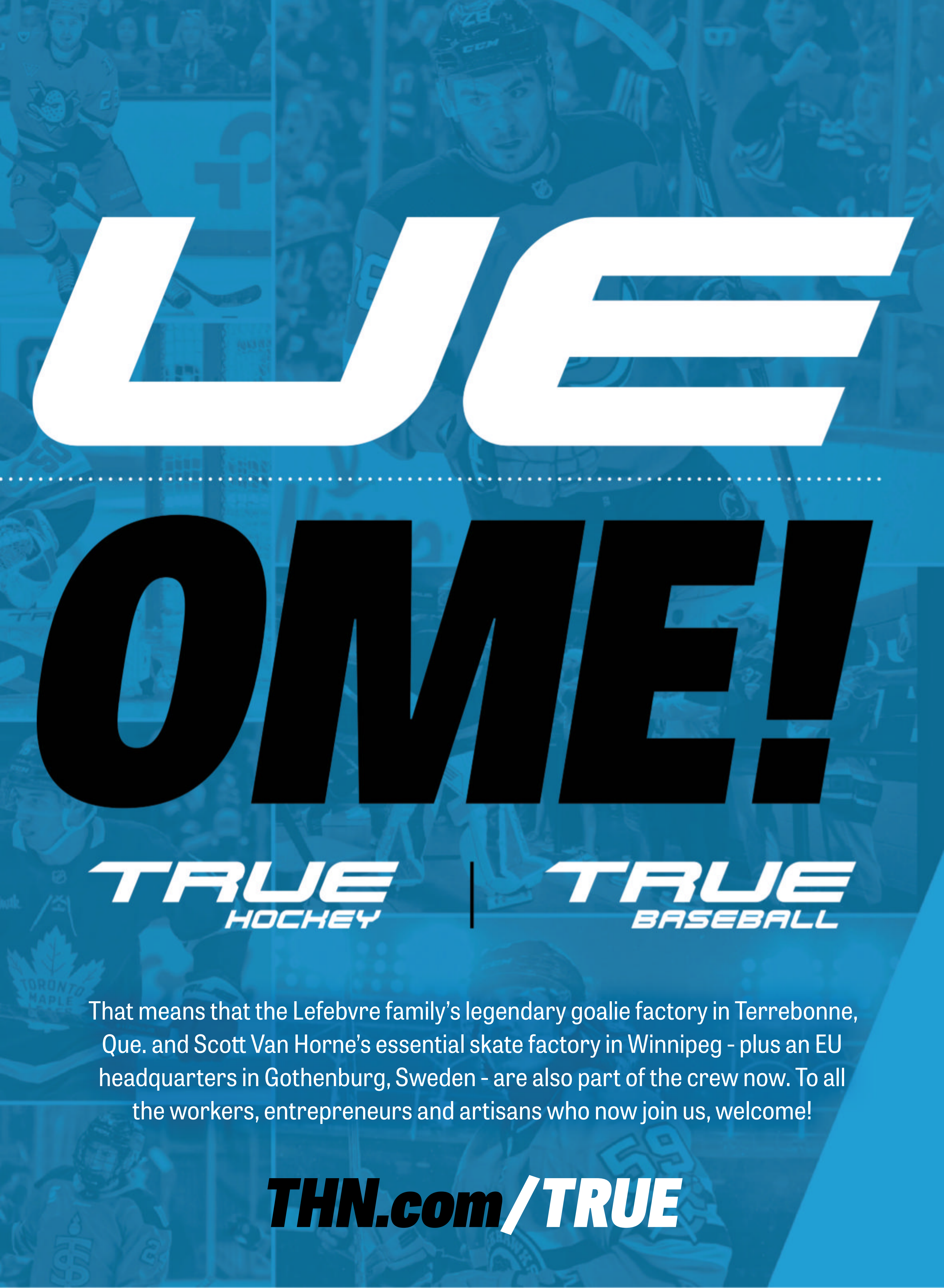

TRUE HOCKEY | TRUE BASEBALL

That means that the Lefebvre family's legendary goalie factory in Terrebonne, Que. and Scott Van Horne's essential skate factory in Winnipeg - plus an EU headquarters in Gothenburg, Sweden - are also part of the crew now. To all the workers, entrepreneurs and artisans who now join us, welcome!

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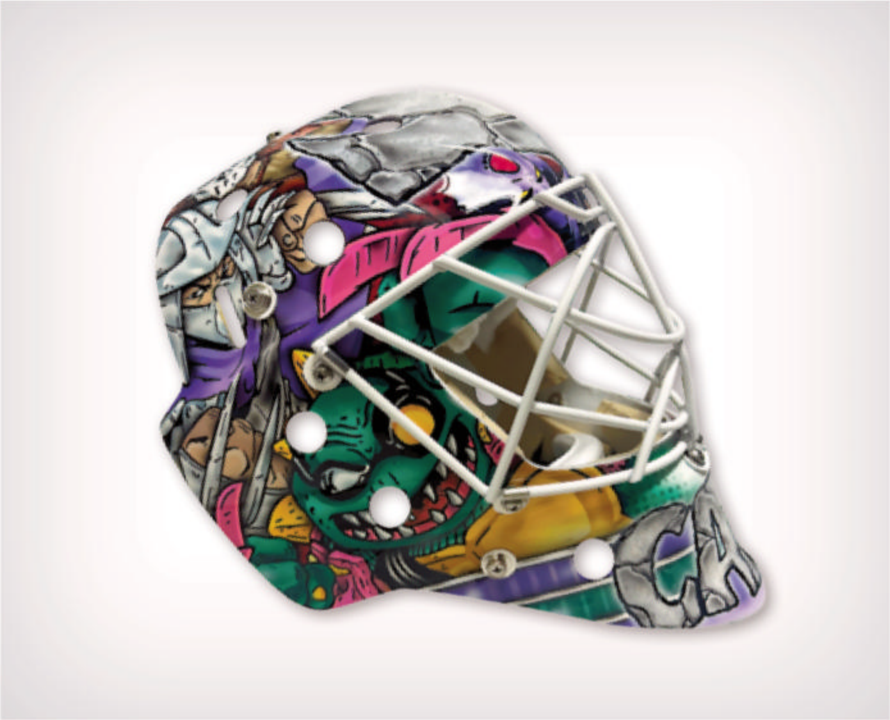
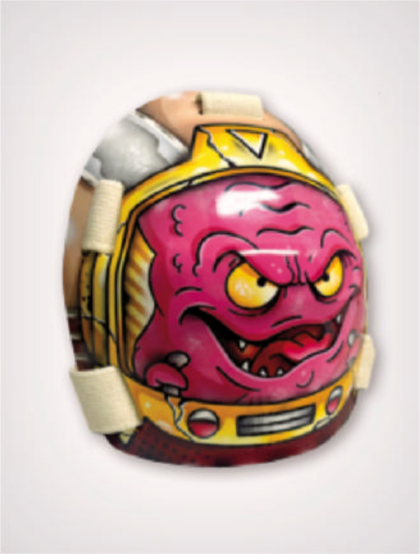
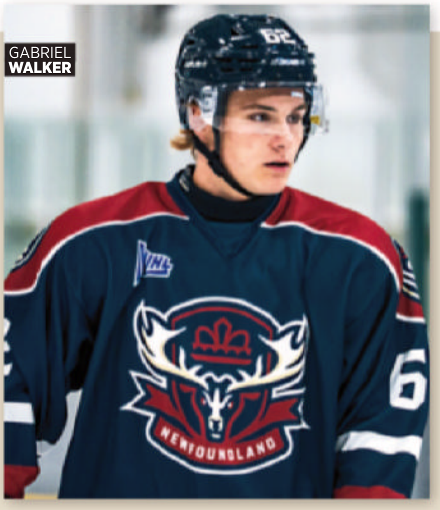
Behind the MASK





TRAVIS MICHAEL | TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

IT'S BEEN NEARLY 40 years since the original *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon aired, but it remains beloved among an entire generation. That includes Travis Michael of TM Kustoms, mask designer for the likes of Thatcher Demko and Dustin Wolf, among others. While Michael originally conceptualized the lid sporting a half-heroes, half-villains paint job, he instead went big on the baddies. The Foot Clan features prominently – its logo and a trio of soldiers are on the crown – with space reserved for their leader, Shredder, and his heavies, Bebop and Rocksteady. But the design also dives deep into the *Turtles* encyclopedia, as lesser-known evildoers Slash and Leatherhead feature on the right and left panels. And no *TMNT*-hockey crossover would be complete without Casey Jones, the stick-wielding henchman. But more than any of the *Turtles'* rivals, it's the back panel that pops most: Krang, the tentacled alien, has left the body he once inhabited to take over all of that real estate. **– JARED CLINTON**



LOUIS-FRANCOIS
BELANGER

Jersey HOUND

NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT | 2025-26

THE NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT ARE the QMJHL's newest team, having relocated from Bathurst to St. John's over the summer. Rebranding from the Acadie-Bathurst Titan to the Regiment, the squad has a different color scheme, going with a combo of navy and maroon. The uniforms are headlined by a crisp main logo featuring an intimidating caribou, while the shoulder crest is a military-inspired shield with a crown and two chevrons. No surprise, but the team based its look on the province's military history, referencing the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Newfoundland Highlanders. Now, the team takes to the ice to do battle. **– RYAN KENNEDY**

MASK: PHOTOS BY TRAVIS MICHAEL; JERSEY: MIKE MEANEY/NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT

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LAST STOP-O-METER

These six greybeards inked one-year contracts for the 2025-26 season in what could easily be the final stops in their impressive NHL careers **BY JARED CLINTON**

YEARNING BURNS

> BRENT BURNS
COL **($1M)**
AGE: 40 (1,497 GP)
'Burnsie' can still contribute, but he'll be 41 by season's end. Signing a one-year pact with the Avalanche made it clear the 2017 Norris Trophy winner is in title-chasing mode. He's a cult favorite who fans would love to see hoist a Stanley Cup.

SO LONG JON?

> JONATHAN TOEWS
WPG **($2M)**
AGE: 37 (1,067 GP)
The bonus-laden structure of Toews' contract could see him earn as much as $7 million if the Jets win it all. But it's a calculated risk. Toews hasn't played since April 2023, and whether he really has anything left in the tank is a question.

TBD FOR JVR

> JAMES VAN RIEMSDYK
DET **($1M)**
AGE: 36 (1,082 GP)
Steady productivity and a veteran presence have earned 'JVR' bottom-six roles on playoff contenders over the past two seasons. But his average ice time dropped to 12:24 in Columbus last year. Perhaps there are still 10 goals and 30 points left in his mitts?

PERRY'S SCARIES

> COREY PERRY
LA **($2M)**
AGE: 40 (1,392 GP)
Whether you view Perry's Cup-final record as comedy or tragedy is a matter of taste. Regardless, his ability to help a contender get over the hump is unparalleled. He won a Cup for the Ducks. Can he win one for their 'Freeway Face-Off' rivals?

PETRY'S WISH

> JEFF PETRY
FLA **($775K)**
AGE: 37 (981 GP)
It wasn't long ago Petry garnered Norris votes, but time has finally caught up to him. His role diminished over the past two seasons in Detroit, and he took a sizable pay cut for the chance at a Cup run with the back-to-back champs.

LARS' DONE CAREER

> LARS ELLER
OTT **($1.25M)**
AGE: 36 (1,116 GP)
Eller built his reputation as a reliable middle-six pivot. Now, he's a bottom-sixer. Whether his career continues is to be seen, but he will always be a hero in Washington for scoring the Caps' Cup-winning goal.

BURNS: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES; PERRY: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES; TOEWS: CANDICE WARD-USA TODAY SPORTS; PETRY: BRIAN BRADSHAW SEVALD-IMAGN IMAGES; VAN RIEMSDYK: CHARLES LECLAIRE-IMAGN IMAGES; ELLER: MATT KROHN-IMAGN IMAGES

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ROOKIES

In the CARDS

THOUGH THE PUCK DOESN'T drop on the NHL season until Oct. 7, new hockey cards for 2025-26 were already dropping during the summer. Upper Deck released its annual MVP set at the tail end of July. Clocking in at just 250 cards – 200 base cards plus 50 short-printed cards – the 2025-26 MVP set is not too challenging to complete, and a 20-pack box won't break the bank at around $60 U.S. or $90 Cdn. Each pack contains seven base cards plus one insert, such as a foil "Mascot Sticker" or a "Silver Script" parallel card bearing a facsimile autograph. One in every two packs has a short-printed card of a star player or of a rookie who made his debut late last season. Notable rookie cards in this year's MVP set include Ivan Demidov, Artyom Levshunov, Ryan Leonard and the other Elias Pettersson. **– SAL BARRY**

UPPER DECK
MVP
MASCOT STICKERS
CALGARY FLAMES
HARVEY THE HOUND™

THE COUNTDOWN

HIGHEST INDIVIDUAL CAP HITS

Gone are the days when having a player making more than $10 million a year was a death knell for Cup contention. We look at each team's top earner for 2025-26 **BY JARED CLINTON**

WHEN JONATHAN TOEWS and Patrick Kane inked matching eight-year, $84-million deals with Chicago in July 2014 (which kicked in for 2015-16), the price tag was justifiable.

Weeks earlier, the duo had come within a win of sending the Blackhawks to a second Cup final in a row. That's after they'd hauled Chicago out of the depths and to two Cup wins. Each even had his own Conn Smythe Trophy. And any handwringing was put to rest when Toews and Kane helped Chicago to another Cup in 2015.

Not long after, though, a flattening cap helped turn those $10.5-million cap hits into anchors. The ensuing crunch thinned the Hawks' roster, Chicago made consecutive first-round exits, and, suddenly, the Toews and Kane deals became cautionary. It didn't help that no team in the cap era made the final with a $10-million player until the Carey Price-led Montreal Canadiens in 2021.

But a steady spending-limit increase means we've entered the age of the top-dollar champion. In 2023, Vegas' Jack Eichel became the first member of the $10-million Cup Winners Club, with Florida's Aleksander Barkov and Sergei Bobrovsky since joining him twice over.

No longer are teams scared of paying for stars. But who is shelling out the most for their go-to guys? Here is each team's top (non-LTIR) cap hit.

1 EDMONTON OILERS

LEON DRAISAITL ($14,000,000)

Draisaitl has the NHL's largest cap hit – until Oilers mate and pending UFA Connor McDavid signs his next contract.

2 TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

AUSTON MATTHEWS ($13,250,000)

Matthews' base salary this season is a mere $775,000. A $14.4-million signing bonus helps make up the difference.

3 COLORADO AVALANCHE

NATHAN MACKINNON ($12,600,000)

In total salary, only Draisaitl will earn more than MacKinnon in '25-26. The Av will take home a healthy $16.05 million.

4 DALLAS STARS

MIKKO RANTANEN ($12,000,000)

Rantanen set a new bar in Dallas. With key cogs locked up, he'll be the Stars' biggest budget item for a few years.

5 VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

MITCH MARNER ($12,000,000)

What does Marner's pact mean for Jack Eichel's next contract? Vegas' top-line pivot is a free agent next summer.

6 NEW YORK RANGERS

ARTEMI PANARIN ($11,642,857)

Panarin has been worth every penny on his seven-year deal with the Rangers. He's fourth in NHL scoring since 2019-20.

NATHAN MACKINNON

7 VANCOUVER CANUCKS

ELIAS PETTERSSON ($11,600,000)

'Petey' needs a bounce-back year or his deal, inked in March 2024, will quickly become among the NHL's worst.

8 BOSTON BRUINS

DAVID PASTRNAK ($11,250,000)

He's the Bruins' load-bearing star. 'Pasta' has the fourth-most goals and points since his big-money pact kicked in.

9 LOS ANGELES KINGS

DREW DOUGHTY ($11,000,000)

When signed in 2018, Doughty's contract was the richest of any NHL D-man. It's now tied for No. 2 among blueliners.

10 BUFFALO SABRES

RASMUS DAHLIN ($11,000,000)

Dahlin bucked the bonus-laden trend. All but $5 million of his eight-year, $88-million pact is paid in base salary.

11 CALGARY FLAMES

JONATHAN HUBERDEAU ($10,500,000)

'Huby' signed his deal after the swap to Calgary. He hasn't justified the price, and it's among the league's worst contracts.

12 PITTSBURGH PENGUINS

ERIK KARLSSON ($10,000,000)

Pittsburgh is only picking up $10 million of Karlsson's $11.5-million cap hit. Whether he remains a Pen is to be seen.

MACKINNON: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

ALEKSANDER
BARKOV

13 FLORIDA PANTHERS

A. BARKOV & S. BOBROVSKY ($10,000,000)

Back-to-back titles with a pair of $10-million men. The two Cup-winning Cats have been worth it at any price.

14 CAROLINA HURRICANES

SEBASTIAN AHO ($9,750,000)

Creative accounting has allowed the Canes to keep cap hits low. The only moderate bank-breaker is Aho's deal.

15 COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

ZACH WERENSKI ($9,583,333)

The Jackets' three biggest cap hits are on the blueline, where Werenski takes up the largest chunk of change.

16 WASHINGTON CAPITALS

ALEX OVECHKIN ($9,500,000)

Is this it for 'The Great 8'? The NHL's all-time leading goal-scorer sees his contract expire after this season.

17 TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING

KUCHEROV, POINT & VASILEVSKIY ($9.5M)

The Bolts set a benchmark for top talent and haven't exceeded it. But that hasn't made managing the cap any easier.

18 MONTREAL CANADIENS

NOAH DOBSON ($9,500,000)

New Hab Dobson tops the budget. If Carey Price weren't on full-time LTIR, his $10.5-million tag would lead the way.

19 NEW YORK ISLANDERS

MATHEW BARZAL ($9,150,000)

Since signing an eight-year extension in October 2022, Barzal has missed 78 games. That's really hurt the Isles.

20 NASHVILLE PREDATORS

ROMAN JOSI ($9,059,000)

Even at the price, Josi has been invaluable to the Preds. His health is a concern after injury issues last season, though.

21 MINNESOTA WILD

KIRILL KAPRIZOV ($9,000,000)

Missed half the season but finished fifth in the NHL in points per game. Pending UFA is headed for major payday.

22 NEW JERSEY DEVILS

DOUGIE HAMILTON ($9,000,000)

Not Jack Hughes. Not Nico Hischier. Not even Jesper Bratt. None of the three are within $1 million of Hamilton's cap hit.

23 PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

TRAVIS KONECNY ($8,750,000)

A $3.25-million raise – paired with a new eight-year pact – sees Konecny move to the top of the heap in Philly.

24 DETROIT RED WINGS

DYLAN LARKIN ($8,700,000)

Even with extensions for Lucas Raymond and Moritz Seider, Larkin's cap hit is still the high-water mark in Detroit.

25 WINNIPEG JETS

C. HELLEBUYCK & M. SCHEIFELE ($8.5M)

The twin deals for Hellebuyck and Scheifele came out of nowhere. The cap-friendly pacts help the Jets compete.

TIM
STUTZLE

26 UTAH MAMMOTH

MIKHAIL SERGACHEV ($8,500,000)

Sergachev signed in Tampa, but the Bolts moved him before his no-trade clause kicked in. It has been Utah's gain.

27 OTTAWA SENATORS

TIM STUTZLE ($8,350,000)

Already one of the best contracts in the NHL? Stutzle has emerged to become a top-line stud for the rising Sens.

28 ST. LOUIS BLUES

J. KYROU & R. THOMAS ($8,125,000)

Blues made clear they were hitching wagon to Kyrou and Thomas by inking duo to identical eight-year deals in 2022.

29 ANAHEIM DUCKS

JACOB TROUBA ($8,000,000)

Trouba will rank fifth in take-home pay on Ducks. Mikael Granlund and Troy Terry tie for highest 2025-26 salary.

30 SEATTLE KRAKEN

VINCE DUNN ($7,350,000)

Tremendous value. On a per-game basis, the only Kraken who has produced more in Seattle is Jared McCann.

31 SAN JOSE SHARKS

DMITRY ORLOV ($6,500,000)

Orlov took a pay cut to join Sharks, but he's still their highest-paid active player. Logan Couture would otherwise be.

32 CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS

T. BERTUZZI & A. BURAKOVSKY ($5.5M)

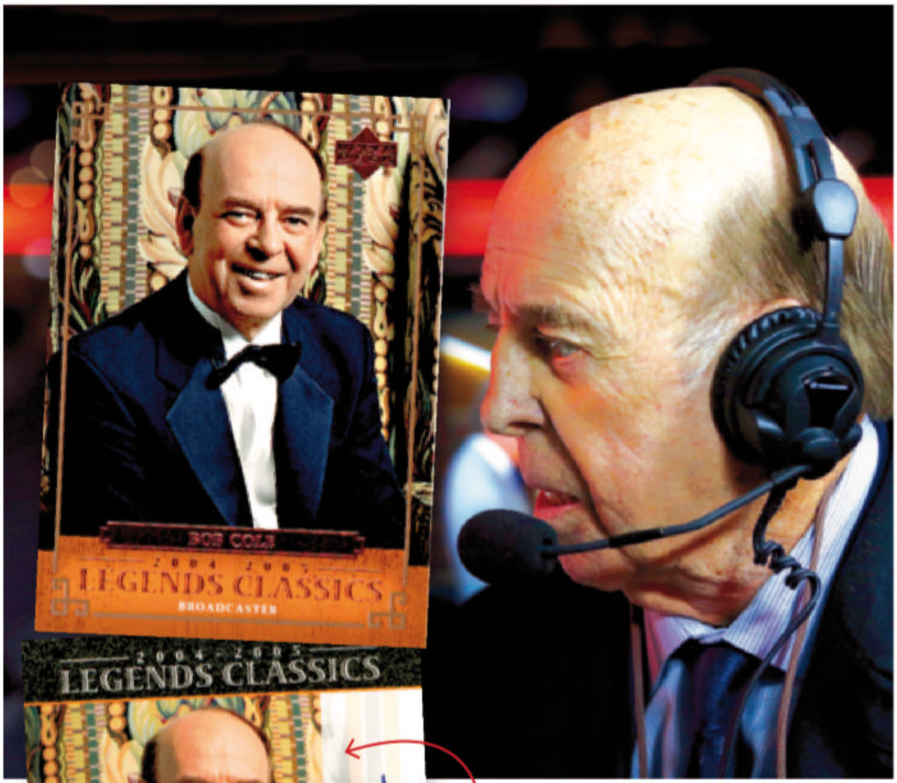
Connor Bedard will soon be the top guy. (Likely overtaking Shea Weber's LTIR-fodder $7.86-million hit, too.) H

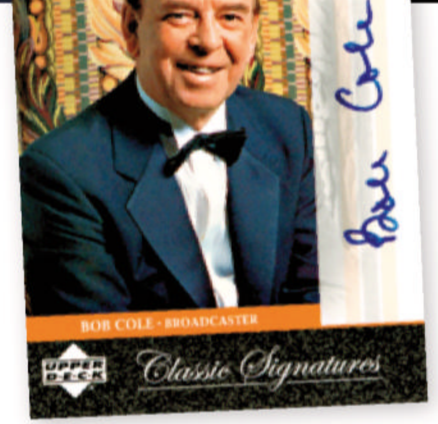
BARKOV: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES; STUTZLE: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

Puck CULTURE

CARDS OF SIX HEWITT AWARD WINNERS

Each year, the Hockey Hall of Fame recognizes a broadcaster with the Foster Hewitt Memorial Award to honor their contributions to the radio and TV industries. The award was named after longtime *Hockey Night in Canada* play-by-play announcer Foster Hewitt. Here are six honored broadcasters, along with their notable hockey cards **BY SAL BARRY**


BOB COLE
2004-2005
LEGENDS CLASSICS
BROADCASTER


2004-2005
LEGENDS CLASSICS
Bob Cole
BOB COLE - BROADCASTER
UPPER DECK
Classic Signatures

1

> BOB COLE

• 2004-05 Upper Deck Legends Classics #5

• 2004-05 Upper Deck Legends Classics – Classic Signatures #CS54

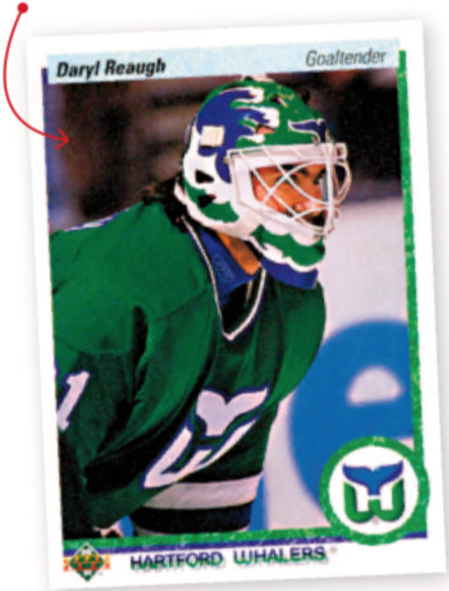
Bob Cole was a play-by-play announcer for *Hockey Night in Canada* for 50 seasons. He usually covered Toronto Maple Leafs games but was also an announcer for several Olympics. He received the Hewitt in 1996. Cole's first mainstream card was found in the 2004-05 Upper Deck Legends Classics set. An autographed version of the card was also randomly seeded into packs.

2

> DARYL REAUGH

• 1990-91 Upper Deck #541

Like several others on this list, Daryl Reaugh is a former player. He saw limited NHL action, playing just 27 big-league games over a nine-year pro career. Nevertheless, 'Razor' has had a long and successful run as a broadcaster, working as a color commentator for the Whalers during the 1995-96 season, then with the Dallas Stars for more than two decades. He has also done color commentary for *Hockey Night in Canada*, ABC, ESPN, Fox, Versus and NBC, as well as video games *NHL 98* and *NHL 99*. Reaugh won the Hewitt in 2025. While Reaugh has appeared on several minor-league and team-issued cards, his rookie card is found in the 1990-91 Upper Deck set.


Daryl Reaugh
Goaltender
HARTFORD WHALERS

COLE: PERRY NELSON-USA TODAY SPORTS; REAUGH: JEROME MIRON-US PRESSWIRE

3

> MIKE EMRICK

• 2020 Topps Allen & Ginter #194
• 2020 Topps Allen & Ginter #FSRA-MDE

Perhaps no voice is as synonymous with hockey in the U.S. as that of Mike 'Doc' Emrick, who is the only hockey announcer to win an Emmy Award – a feat he has accomplished nine times. He has called New Jersey Devils and Philadelphia Flyers games, national broadcasts for Fox, SportsChannel, ESPN, Versus, NBC and CBS and several All-Star, Olympic and World Cup games. He received the Hewitt in 2008 and has several cards in the 2020 Topps Allen & Ginter set, including the "base card" version, an autographed version and a version featuring a piece of a broadcast-worn necktie.

EMRICK
TOPPS
ALLEN & GINTER
EMRICK
SPORTS BROADCASTER
SUBJECT USED
MEMORABILIA
TOPPS
ALLEN & GINTER
2020

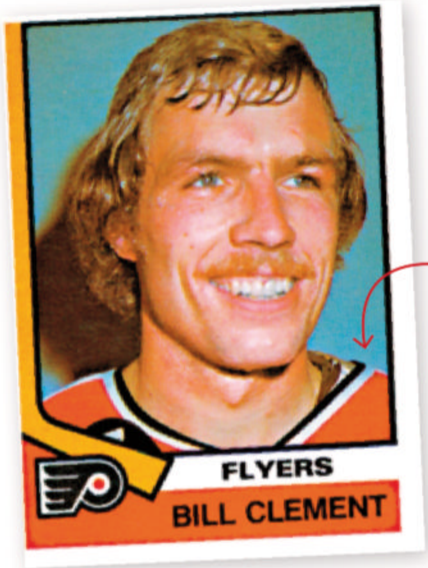
HOWIE MEEKER —Toronto Maple Leafs
Right Wing. 1950-51 Record—Goals 6
Assists 14, Points 20, Min. in Penalty 24
Born: Kitchener, Ont., Nov. 4, 1924
No. 72 in the "PARKIE" 1951-52 Hockey Series.

4

> HOWIE MEEKER

• 1951-52 Parkhurst #72

Howie Meeker spent eight years in the NHL with the Toronto Maple Leafs, winning the Calder Trophy in 1947 along with four Stanley Cups. A longtime color commentator on *Hockey Night in Canada,* Meeker also ran a successful hockey school, which was the subject of a weekly TV series. Meeker was a pioneer in breaking down video replays of games. He retired from broadcasting in 1998 and was honored that year with the Hewitt. Like many players who debuted in the NHL during the 1940s, Meeker did not get a rookie card until the 1951-52 Parkhurst set.

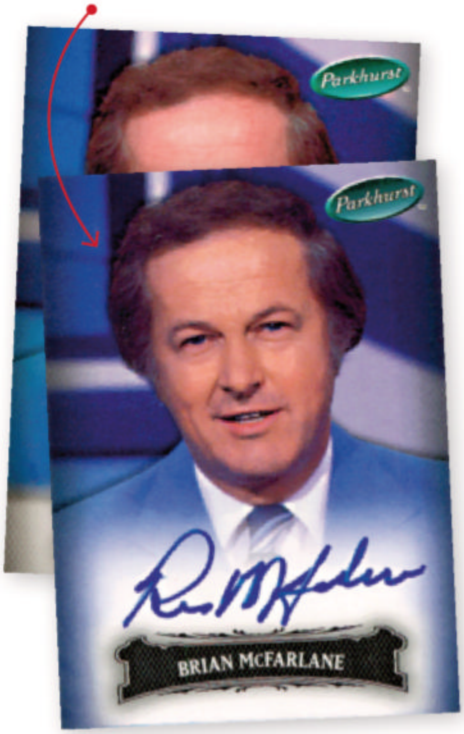

FLYERS
BILL CLEMENT

5

> BRIAN MCFARLANE

• 2006-07 Parkhurst #72
• 2006-07 Parkhurst - Autographs #72

McFarlane was a mainstay on *Hockey Night in Canada* for 28 years and is the author of more than 100 hockey books. He was also the intermission host of NBC's *Game of the Week* in the United States during the 1970s. McFarlane was awarded the Hewitt in 1995. A decade later, he was honored with his own trading card in the 2006-07 Parkhurst set, which focused on retired legends and fan favorites, as well as several coaches and broadcasters. The card pictures McFarlane in an iconic baby blue *HNIC* blazer. An autographed version of McFarlane's "rookie card" was also issued.


Parkhurst
Parkhurst
BRIAN MCFARLANE

6

> BILL CLEMENT

• 1974-75 O-Pee-Chee #357

Bill Clement had an 11-year NHL career and was a member of the Philadelphia Flyers' Stanley Cup championships in 1974 and 1975. After he retired from playing, Clement became a color commentator in 1986, working for ESPN, SportsChannel, OLN, Versus, NBC and CBC. He also lent his voice to numerous video games, including the next-gen releases of each year from *NHL 07* to *NHL 14,* plus *NHL 2000*, *NHL 2001* and *ESPN NHL 2K5*. He retired from broadcasting in 2021 and was the recipient of the Hewitt in 2022. His rookie card appears in the 1974-75 O-Pee-Chee set. H

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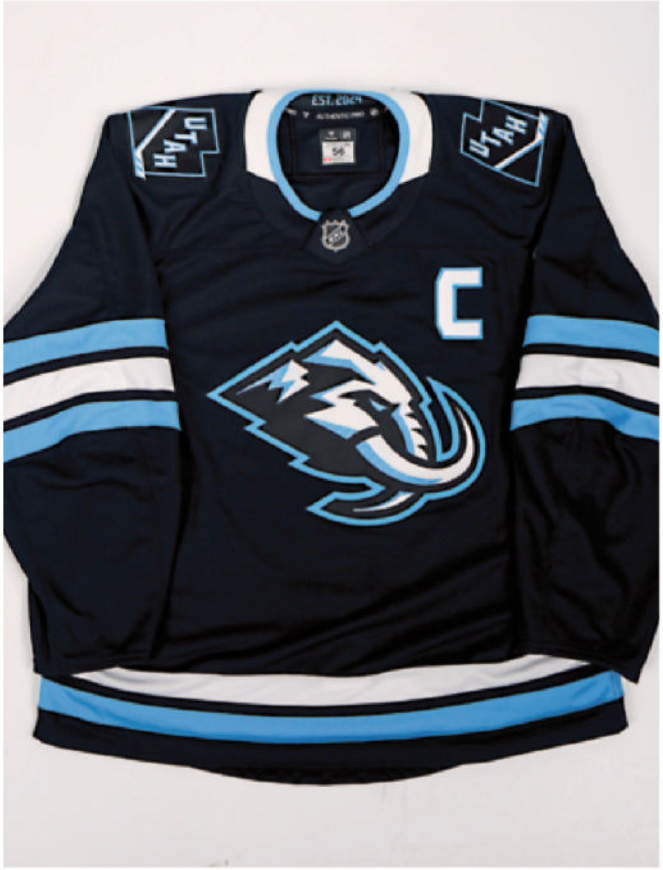
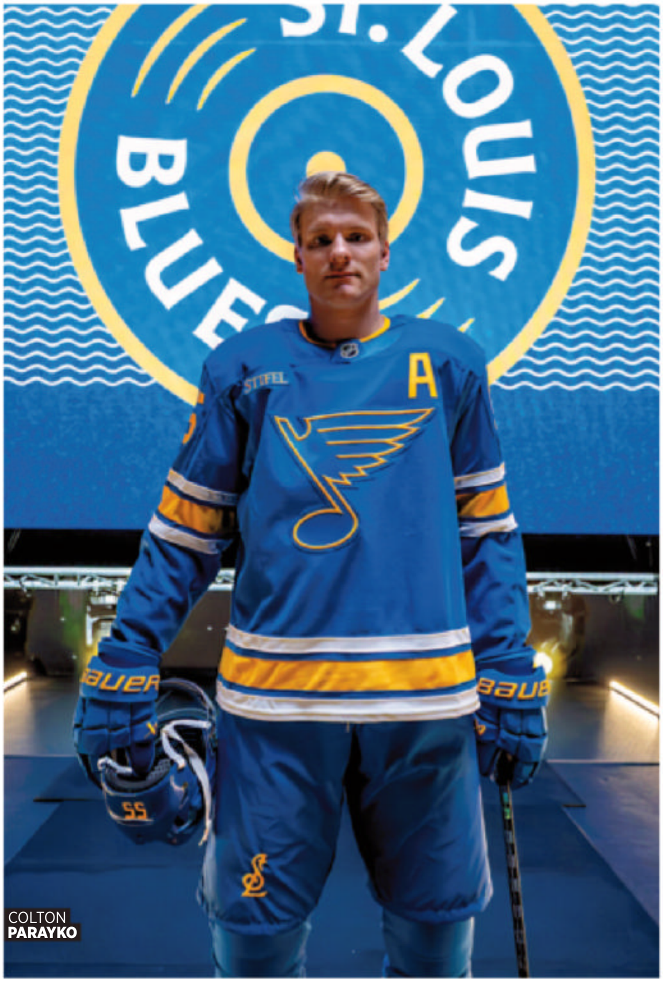
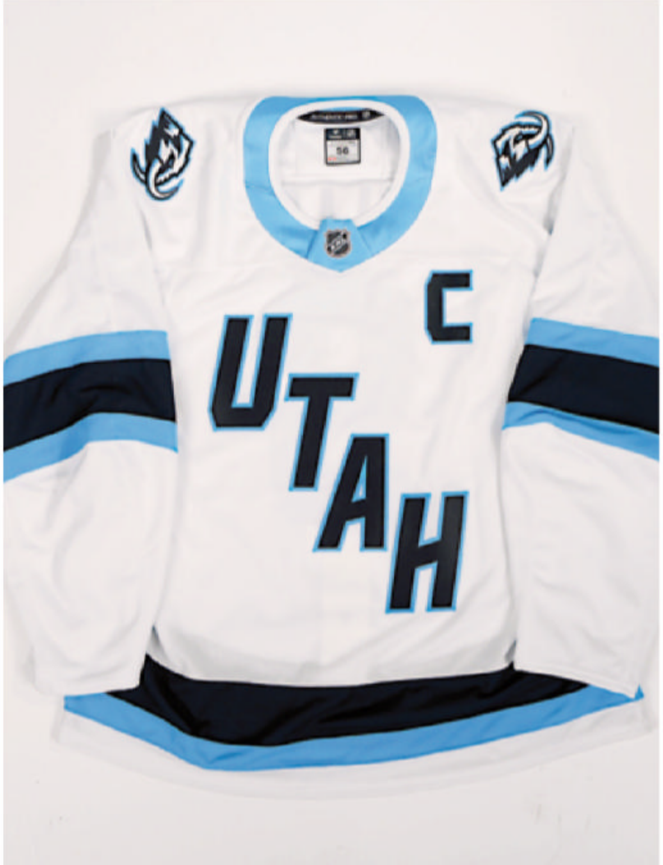




COLTON **PARAYKO**



NHL

TIDYING UP NICE

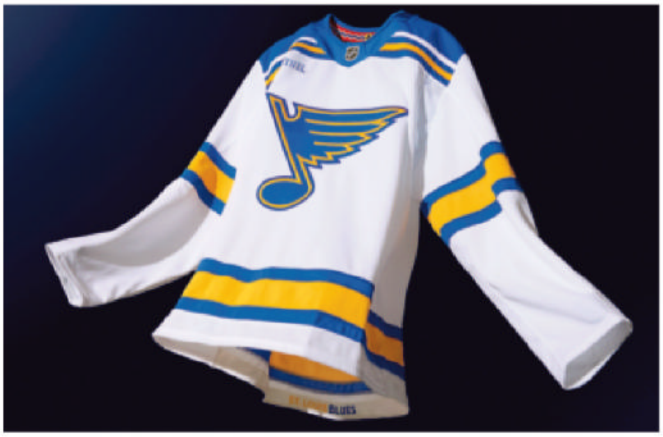
The new NHL season will bring with it a handful of new threads from teams around the league. Here is a sneak peek at what you'll see come October **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

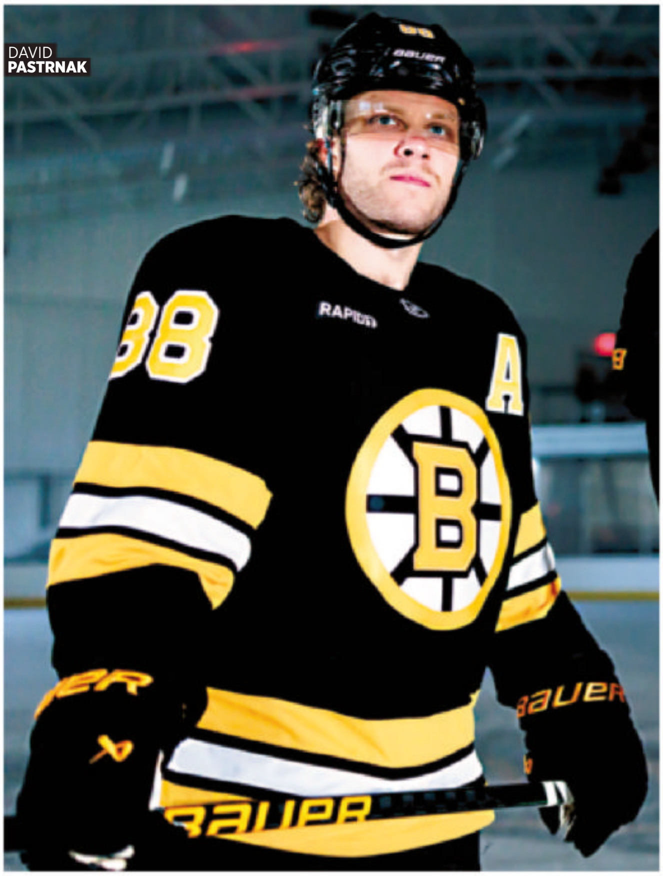
WHEN IT COMES TO new looks, the 2025-26 NHL season is giving us the newest and some of the oldest. With the latter, *tradition* is the buzzword.

Several teams will sport new jerseys this season, with the most obvious being the now-named Utah Mammoth, freed from their generic Hockey Club moniker of Year 1 in Salt Lake City. The Mammoth will take to the ice with a very nice logo: a prehistoric pachyderm whose crown is composed of the mountains synonymous with the state. An outline of Utah itself also appears in the mammoth's face – an easter egg of sorts. That level of detail has become key in current uniform designs, and even the angled crossbars on the 'A' and the 'H' in the 'Utah' wordmark are supposed to reflect mountain steepness.

The St. Louis Blues went with a mix of the old and new with their latest design, which is anchored by a return to the franchise's original shade of blue

UTAH: PHOTOS BY UTAH MAMMOTH; ST. LOUIS: PHOTOS BY ST. LOUIS BLUES



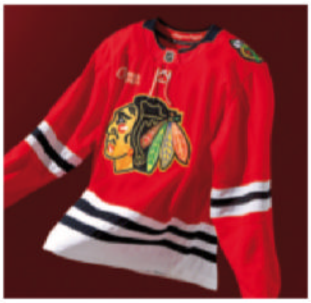

DAVID
PASTRNAK

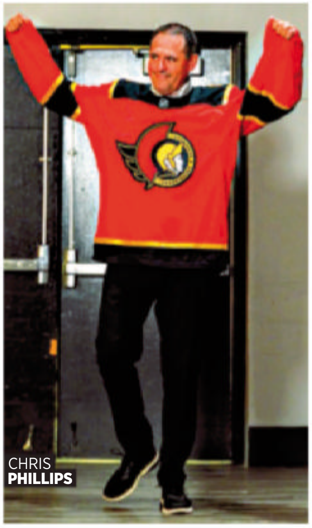
(royal blue is now reserved for the third jersey). The iconic Note logo also got a revamp, plus the Blues have added some additional secondary and tertiary marks, including an excellent interlocking 'STL.'

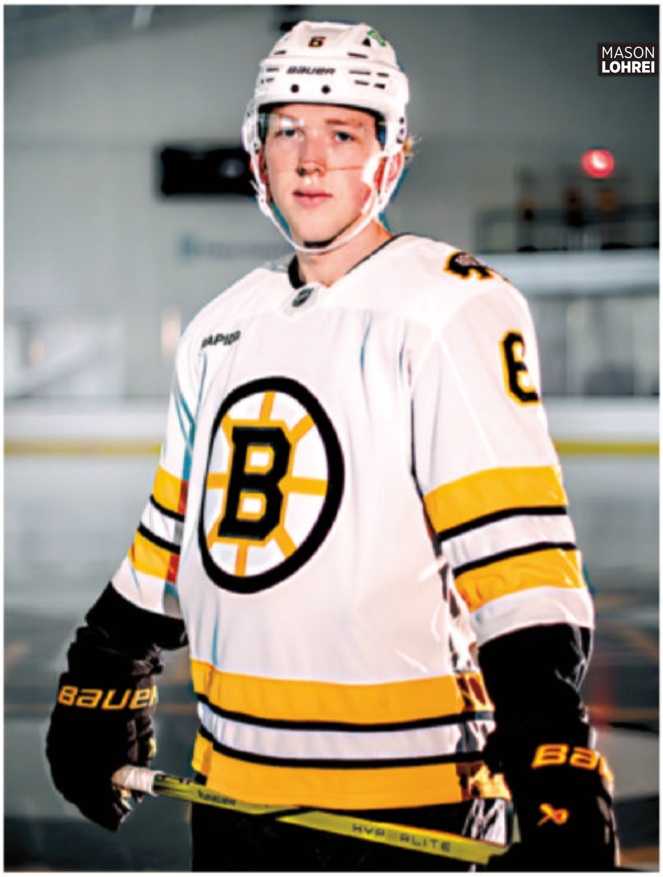
Over in Boston, the Bruins also updated their legendary spoked-B crest (flipping the gold and black), while introducing a new shoulder logo featuring a crawling bear outline with 'Bruins' written on the home version and 'Boston' for the away jerseys. The bear draws inspiration from Boston's original uniform back in 1924.

Elsewhere, look for a couple more Original Six teams to celebrate their centennial seasons with special looks to be worn at home. Chicago has already released its jersey, which adds gold lining to the primary crest and the back numbers. Meanwhile, Detroit is expected to unveil its 100th anniversary sweater later in September.

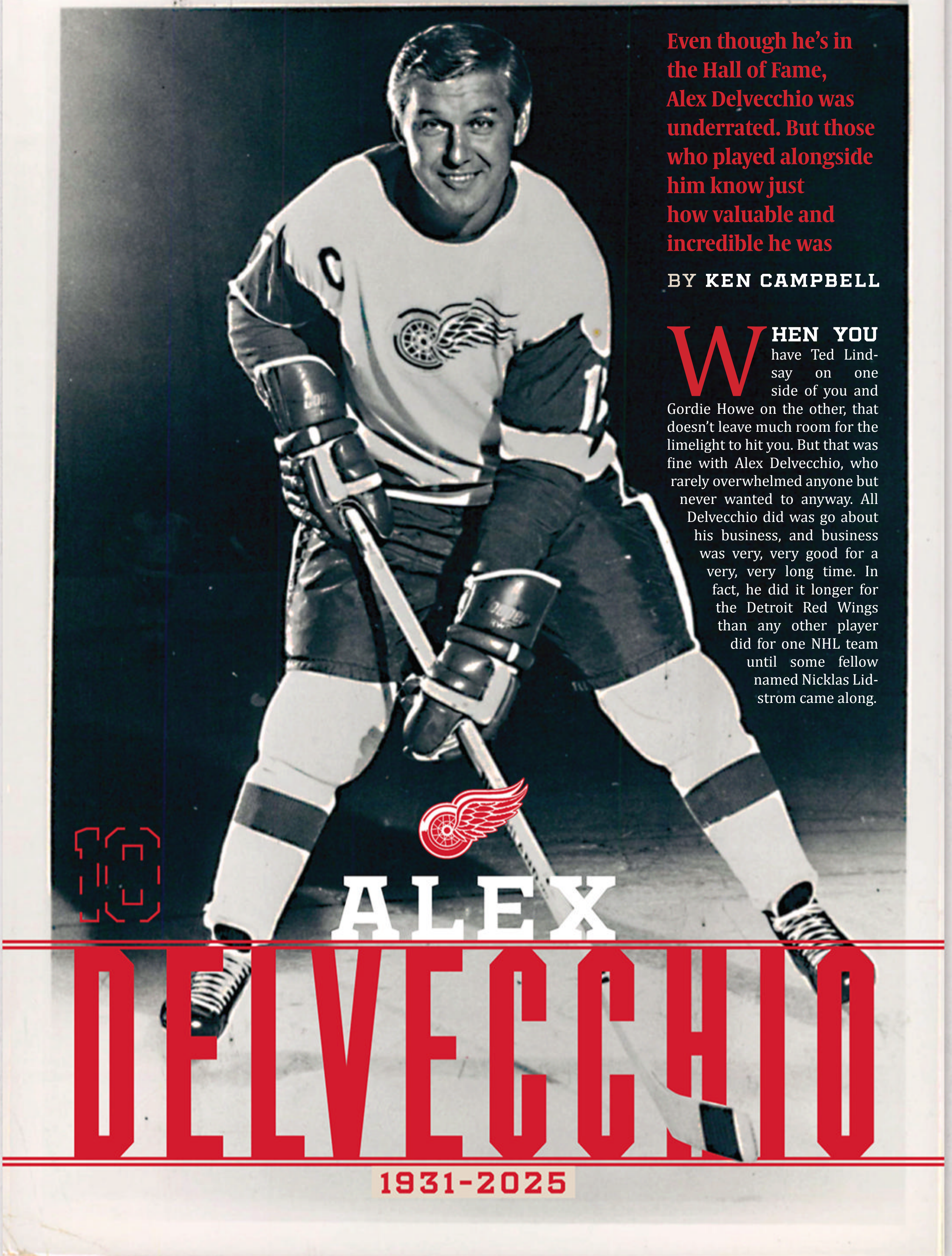
As for third jerseys, the Ottawa Senators have remixed their look with a red base and dramatic black shoulders. H




CHRIS
PHILLIPS


MASON
LOHREI

BOSTON: PHOTOS BY BOSTON BRUINS; CHICAGO: PHOTOS BY CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS VIA FANATICS; OTTAWA: PHOTO BY OTTAWA SENATORS HOCKEY CLUB



ALEX DELVECCHIO

1931-2025

Even though he's in the Hall of Fame, Alex Delvecchio was underrated. But those who played alongside him know just how valuable and incredible he was

BY **KEN CAMPBELL**

WHEN YOU have Ted Lindsay on one side of you and Gordie Howe on the other, that doesn't leave much room for the limelight to hit you. But that was fine with Alex Delvecchio, who rarely overwhelmed anyone but never wanted to anyway. All Delvecchio did was go about his business, and business was very, very good for a very, very long time. In fact, he did it longer for the Detroit Red Wings than any other player did for one NHL team until some fellow named Nicklas Lidstrom came along.

LEFT+TOP: DETROIT FREE PRESS/IMAGN IMAGES; RIGHT: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: RICK OSENTOSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS

ALEX DELVECCHIO

1931-2025

Alex Delvecchio died at 93 July 1, the day when modern-day players annually sign multi-million-dollar contracts, thanks in part to the trail players such as Delvecchio blazed for them. Even though he played 22 full seasons in the league, Delvecchio never accrued the wealth that even third- and fourth-liners can today. Nor did he ever receive his due, even though he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1977 and his number is hanging in Detroit right there with those of Howe, Lindsay, Terry Sawchuk, Sid Abel, Steve Yzerman, Red Kelly and Lidstrom.

It's hard to consider a Hall of Famer underrated, but Delvecchio fits the description. For five seasons, he centered 'The Production Line' with Lindsay on the left and Howe on the right in the midst of some of the franchise's best years, and he did so happily in a supporting role while Howe and Lindsay took turns being the star attraction.

And Delvecchio couldn't have been more different than his linemates. Lindsay, nicknamed 'Terrible Ted,' was a firebrand who whacked first and asked questions later and became the driving force behind the formation of the NHL Players' Association. Howe was 'Mr. Hockey,' and his temper and elbows could be lethal. Delvecchio, meanwhile, went by the nickname 'Fats,' and in the five seasons he centered The Production Line, he had a total of 131 penalty minutes. Lindsay had 30 more PIM in 1955-56 alone. Delvecchio won the Lady Byng Trophy three times in his career and registered single-digit PIM totals in six seasons.

Winter CLASSIC
BRIDGESTONE
HOCKEYTOWN
WINTER FESTIVAL
Winter CLASSIC
BRIDGESTONE

RED KELLY, TED LINDSAY, GEORGE ARMSTRONG,
ALEX DELVECCHIO & KRIS DRAPER

"There were very few ripples in the way he went about his business," said former teammate Mickey Redmond, now a broadcaster for the team. "He avoided the limelight like it was the plague. He did not like that stuff at all. He was uncomfortable with accolades, and he didn't like being told he was good. He didn't need that."

LIDSTROM
5
YZERMAN
19
ABEL
12
SAWCHUK
1
DELVECCHIO
10
LINDSAY
7

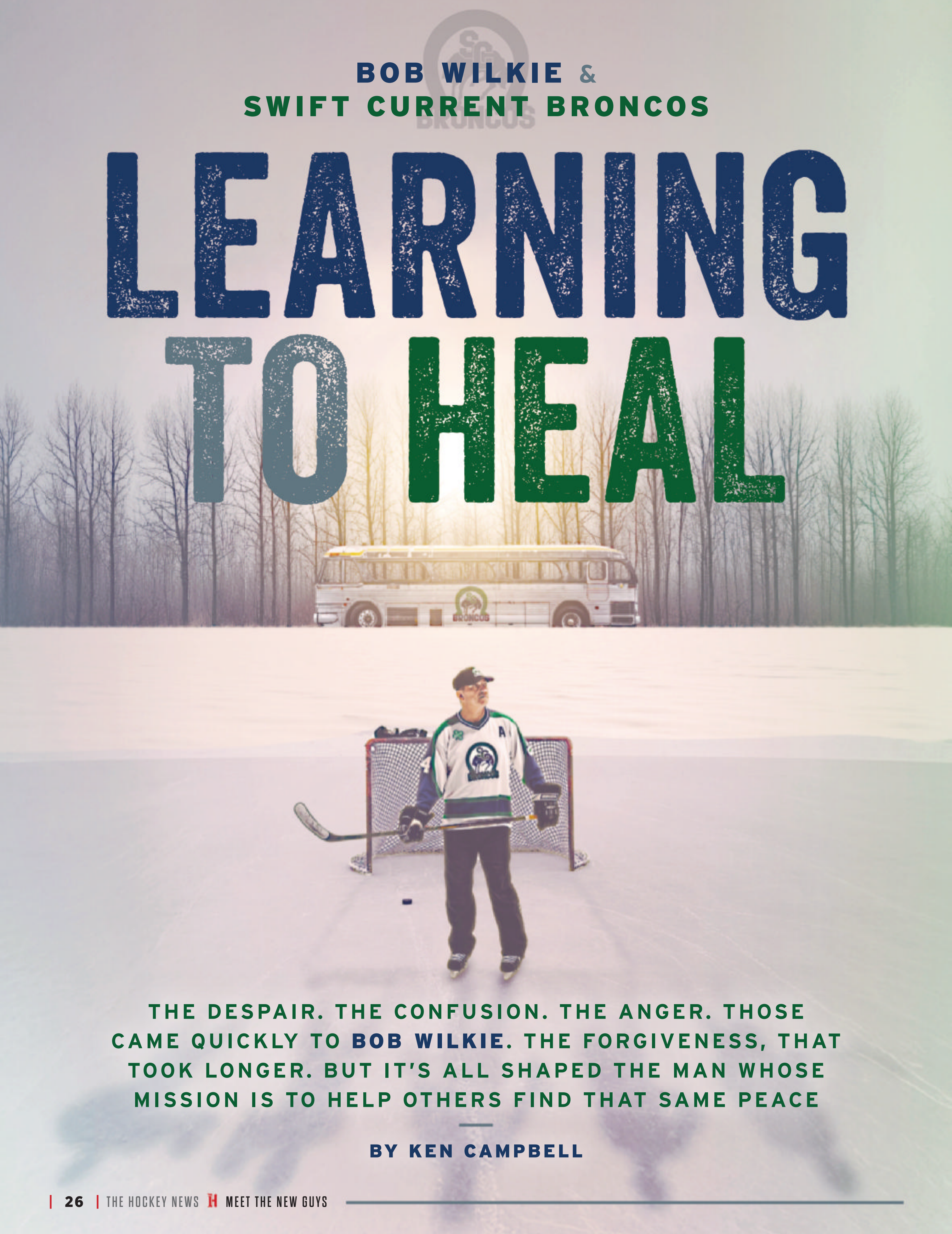
DISTINGUISHED DIGITS
Delvecchio's No. 10 is one of a select few numbers to hang from the rafters in Detroit.

Delvecchio was a terrific puckhandler and passer who could read the rhythms of the game, which made him the perfect linemate for the reckless Lindsay and the bull-in-a-china-shop Howe. After winning the Stanley Cup in his rookie year, Delvecchio was put with Howe and Lindsay when Abel was traded prior to 1952-53. Lindsay once said of Delvecchio's passing skills that you could put a table full of fine china between him and his intended target, "and he could throw the puck across the ice and that puck would land and he wouldn't break one of those glasses."

Delvecchio won the Stanley Cup three times in his first four NHL seasons, then never won it again. The Red Wings remained competitive through the 1950s and the first half of the '60s, qualifying for the final four times between 1961 and '66 before the franchise fell into a state of disrepair that took almost three decades to fix.

But Delvecchio and his standard of play were a constant for the Red Wings, even through the lean years. Redmond came to the Red Wings from the Montreal Canadiens in a trade for Frank Mahovlich in 1971, and in 1972-73, with Delvecchio as his center, Redmond registered his first 50-goal season. That was the last full season that Delvecchio played, and he registered the second-best totals of his career in assists (53) and points (71). He assisted on 23 of Redmond's 52 goals that season, and Redmond had a helper on 10 of Delvecchio's 18 goals.

Redmond said Delvecchio was a master at coming through center ice in second gear to draw the defenseman, which would allow him to enter the zone in fourth gear. "At the old Olympia, he knew exactly which board to hit on the dump-in that the puck would come back too far for the goalie to come and get it," Redmond said, "And I would come in down the right side and let one rip from the faceoff dot. It was pretty special stuff. He was a winger's dream, whether you were a right winger or a left winger. If you couldn't get scoring chances playing with a guy like Delvecchio, you were doing something wrong."

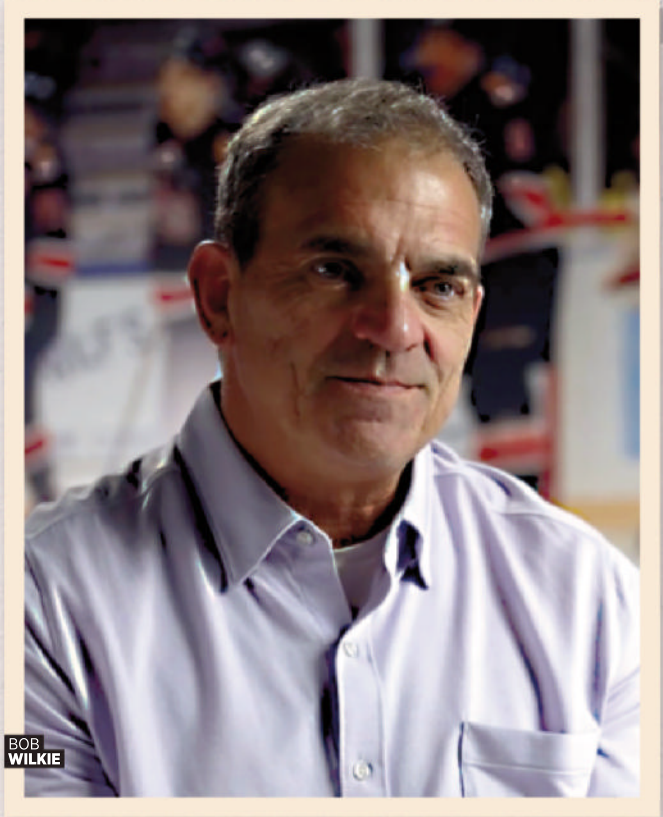


BOB WILKIE & SWIFT CURRENT BRONCOS

LEARNING TO HEAL

THE DESPAIR. THE CONFUSION. THE ANGER. THOSE CAME QUICKLY TO BOB WILKIE. THE FORGIVENESS, THAT TOOK LONGER. BUT IT'S ALL SHAPED THE MAN WHOSE MISSION IS TO HELP OTHERS FIND THAT SAME PEACE

BY KEN CAMPBELL



IN THE END, IT wouldn't have made any difference whether or not he held Chris Mantyka's hand in those final moments. Because Chris Mantyka would have died anyway. But Bob Wilkie didn't, because he and Peter Soberlak could only watch in horror and disbelief as their Swift Current Broncos teammate had the life sucked out of him. Mantyka was 19, and Wilkie and Soberlak were 17, and who the hell at that age knows how to handle something like that?

It might have made a difference for Wilkie, or it might not have. What we do know is that the devastation of the Broncos bus crash in 1986 and the fact he didn't hold his teammate's hand, plus a whole lot of other unresolved trauma, led him on a path of self-destruction with alcohol and drugs that took the better part of two decades to recover from.

The day before he scorched the Royal Portrush Golf Club en route to this year's British Open title, the world's undisputed No. 1 player, Scottie Scheffler, openly wondered what the point of it all was. He talked about how the euphoria of winning a golf tournament is so fleeting that it only lasts a few minutes.

But trauma? That stuff stays with you for a lifetime.

Wilkie watched Scheffler with amazement in July, and part of him wished he could have had that kind of perspective when he was playing hockey and in the early years after he retired. But it's a little tricky to be in touch with what's really important in life when you, in order: feel the unrelenting pressure of expectation from the time you're seven; watch your teammate die in front of you in a bus accident; discover later in life that you were denied the help you so desperately needed, in part because your junior coach was a serial sexual abuser trying to avoid being discovered; have a stillborn child; and lose your life savings on a failed coffee shop.

Those are also all the things that brought Bob Wilkie to where he is now. And it's a good place. The more he tells his story as the owner of I Got Mind, a Calgary-based company that provides education and support in the mental-wellness space, the better he feels. "For me, it's wonderful," said Wilkie, now 56. "Something is going to happen to all of us as we go through life. The reason we know joy is because we know pain, and sometimes, life is going to be painful. It's a good story. It's actually quite f---ed up when you think about what we went through as teenage boys."

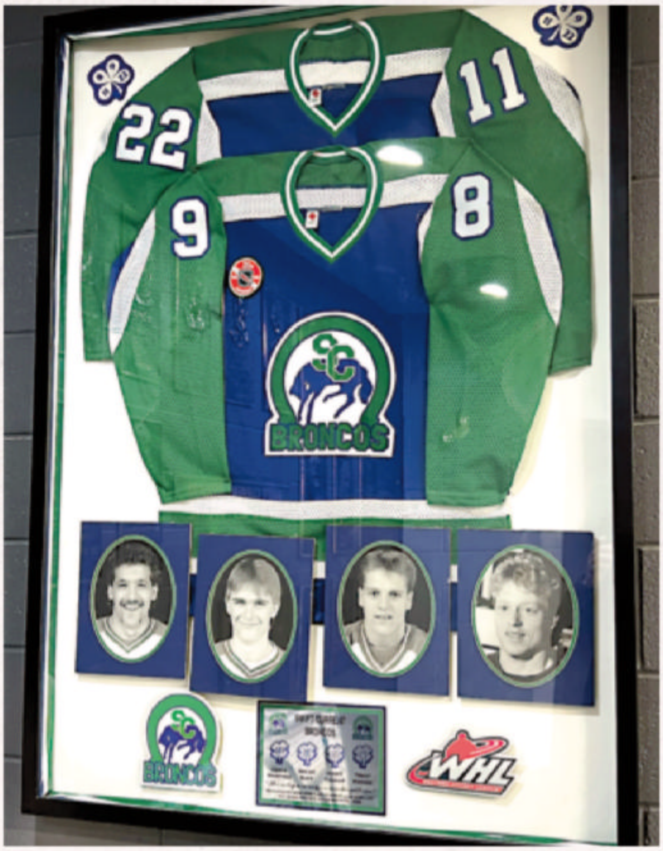
Wilkie's hockey career, such as it was, ended a long time ago. He hasn't played professionally since appearing in 15 games for the Anchorage Aces of the defunct West Coast League 25 years ago, which was six years after playing the last of his 18 NHL games.

Wilkie spent 10 seasons in the pros, playing for 12 teams in six leagues. And aside from winning the 1992 Calder Cup title in the AHL and a Turner Cup championship in the defunct International League the following season, it was an exercise in futility and unfulfilled expectations, both for him and the organizations to which he belonged. What made it so frustrating was that Wilkie, the 41st overall pick in the 1987 draft, had NHL size, skill, hockey sense and pedigree. As THN contributing editor Brian Costello, who covered Wilkie at the time for the *Swift Current Sun*, said in *Sideways*, a new film about the bus crash, with Wilkie as its central figure: "Bob Wilkie was like the Paul Coffey of the Western League. He could skate like the wind. He was big. He was strong. He had a powering shot. You could tell this guy had NHL written all over him."

Wilkie acknowledges that after the Dec. 30, 1986, accident that killed Mantyka and fellow teammates Trent Kresse, Brent Ruff and Scott Kruger, it was much easier for him to live up to the expectations of being a screw-up than an NHL star.

ALWAYS REMEMBERED

The Swift Current Broncos retired the numbers of the four players killed in the 1986 bus accident.



PHOTOS COURTESSY OF SIDWAYS MOVIE/TRILIGHT ENTERTAINMENT INC.

Drinking his problems away offered a path of less resistance than trying to ask for help with them. It was far less challenging to direct his competitive instincts into clashing with coaches than into his performance on the ice. “You get slapped with a label, and everywhere you go, everybody is just waiting for you to show up,” Wilkie said. “I was carrying a lot of demons then, and I went to my coping mechanism, and, sure enough, everybody was, ‘Yup, there he is. We knew it.’ Nobody understood, and they’re just sitting there and judging me, and I’m sitting there quietly saying, ‘You have no f---in’ idea what I’ve dealt with.’ ”

People had no idea, because in the 1980s, mental health was not even an afterthought. Athletes who had suffered adversity were lauded for putting their heads down and playing through the pain, so Wilkie and his Swift Current teammates had no idea how to tell anyone about the suffering they were enduring. As Los Angeles Kings GM Ken Holland, who was the Detroit Red Wings director of amateur scouting when they drafted Wilkie, said in *Sideways*, “Looking back, we didn’t do enough. We didn’t know enough.”

KEN
HOLLAND

> **THEY’RE SITTING THERE JUDGING ME, AND I’M SAYING, ‘YOU HAVE NO F---IN’ IDEA WHAT I’VE DEALT WITH’** – **BOB WILKIE**

Soberlak, a first-round pick of the Edmonton Oilers in 1987 who didn’t appear in a single NHL game, talked about how people with the right intentions seemed powerless to help because they didn’t have the tools. “Everybody was so wonderfully supportive and caring,” he said in the film. “But, at the end of the day, nobody asked us what we saw. We needed more than a hug. We needed more than, ‘It’s going to be OK.’ ”

Soberlak is now a professor in the faculty of education and is the men’s assistant soccer coach at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C. He came out the other side, just as Wilkie did. But you see the pain in his face as he speaks in the film, as you see with Wilkie when he chronicles his struggles, and it drives home the point that so many who came out of the Swift Current experience did not do so unscathed. Joe Sakic more than realized his potential as an NHL player. Sheldon Kennedy, the prime target and a survivor of sexual abuse by Broncos coach-GM Graham James, had a 310-game career in the NHL, and he now devotes his life to helping other survivors of trauma and sexual abuse. There were a few others who played regularly in the NHL, but very few for such a talented team. Tim Tisdale – who scored the overtime-winner in the Memorial Cup title game two years later after leading the Broncos with 139 points – didn’t play an NHL game. Aside from Sakic and Kennedy, Ryan McGill was the only other player involved in the crash who went on to play 150 NHL games.

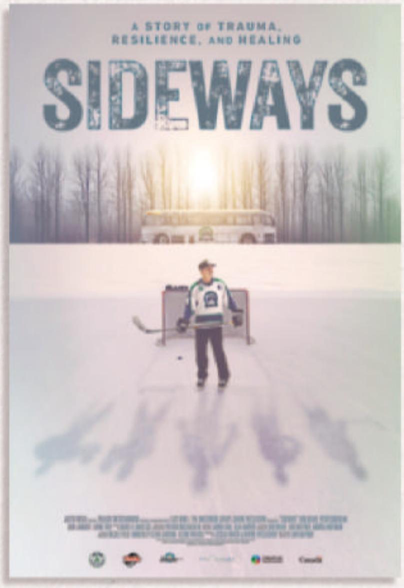
The tale of the Broncos from the good (making the playoffs that season and winning a Memorial Cup two years later), the bad (the struggles the players endured after the crash) and the ugly (news that surfaced in 1996 that James had sexually abused Kennedy and another Broncos player, along with former NHL star Theo Fleury and others he coached in youth hockey in Winnipeg) have been told many times. In 2012, Leesa Culp, who was in the truck behind the Broncos’ bus that day, published *Sudden Death: The Incredible Saga of the 1986 Swift Current Broncos* along with Wilkie and hockey writer Gregg Drinnan. A year later, Trilight Entertainment secured the rights to adapt the book into a feature film.

Sideways producer Shayne Putzlocher has a script ready and has been trying to make a feature film for more than a decade. “It’s been turned down everywhere,” Putzlocher said. “I’ve been told it’s not diverse enough. CBC told me a long time ago that they were getting out of hockey. We’ve had distributors say, ‘We don’t like the Graham James side of it. How do we market this thing with a (sexual

PHOTOS COURTESSY OF SIDWAYS MOVIE/TRILIGHT ENTERTAINMENT INC.

Sideways, the documentary, is the by-product of a larger project Putzlocher has to make a movie on the crash.

BREAKING THE ICE
Wilkie has established a second career as a life coach who speaks to hockey organizations and players.


A STORY OF TRAUMA, RESILIENCE, AND HEALING
SIDEWAYS

abuser)?' I've been blocked every way you can imagine."

After the eerily similar but more deadly Humboldt Broncos crash in 2018, Putzlocher decided it was time to turn the Swift Current story into a documentary. (Full disclosure: one of the financial backers of the film is 7HL Investment Group, a group of former NHL players who know Wilkie from playing with and against him.) The film is due to come out in the fall, with the premieres being held Sept. 8 at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto and Oct. 13 in Swift Current. The official release date is Nov. 4, and it will be available at sidewaysdocumentary.ca and on DVD.

The film chronicles Wilkie's redemption arc from troubled minor-pro player to husband and father. Later in Wilkie's career, he started journalling, which helped him begin to express his feelings. He ultimately received his life-coach certification and, in 2008, started I Got Mind, which speaks to hockey organizations, businesses and individuals.

Wilkie tells his story with a focus on mental health and the importance of being vulnerable and open to speaking about stress and anxiety. And even though sports and society have made some incredible gains in the mental-health space, acceptance hasn't always been easy. "When I first started this, I used to get laughed out of places because I wanted to teach kids how to deal with their emotions," Wilkie said. " 'Who are you and what do you think you're going to do here?' We do sessions with parents, and, even now, there are a couple of parents who might say, 'This is stupid, and you don't know what you're doing and what you're talking about.' It's always difficult to deal with the judgment."

When you speak to as many young people and families as Wilkie does, you start to see some patterns, some of them pretty disturbing. One common theme Wilkie is seeing in the people he deals with is that parents and caregivers, with the best of intentions and a desire to see their children succeed, are actually making their kids' lives more difficult in the long run. Boys and girls who are told how special they are from the time they're chosen for a AAA tyke super elite under-6 all-star team sometimes have difficulty processing the inevitable challenges that come their way later in life when their parents have less of an influence.

> "I'M SO THANKFUL THAT I'VE GOTTEN TO THAT PLACE WHERE I DON'T HOLD ANY ILL WILL OR RESENTMENT
>
> **- BOB WILKIE**

"What we're typically seeing these days in kids is a real lack of resilience," Wilkie said. "Because they've had everything handed to them and done for them, they just don't have the skills, mentally and emotionally, to get through the challenges and get where they want to be. And we have an addiction to phones, which often means we have no communication skills, relationship-building skills or an ability to deal with and manage conflict. Parents overcorrect and get involved and do things that remove the obstacles from the kids. Now you've got athletes that are highly sensitive, highly stressed and with no emotional intelligence."

A couple of years ago, a guy who coached Wilkie in youth hockey came to Calgary to scout WHL players, and Wilkie sat down with him. Wilkie had always thought the coach hated him, but he learned during that conversation that wasn't the case. In fact, the opposite was true. The coach liked Wilkie and believed he had a lot of potential as a player. But the only way that coach, again with the best of intentions, felt he could motivate and extract the most from Wilkie was to be inordinately hard on him. Wilkie didn't respond well to that, which is why it's important to him for people to know how to communicate their expectations to young people. "I'm so thankful I've gotten to that place where I don't hold any ill will or resentment to those people anymore," Wilkie said. "Even Graham. What I've come to learn about trauma is that Graham experienced his own, and that made him who he was."

Most importantly, Bob Wilkie has learned to forgive himself, for not holding Chris Mantyka's hand, for not becoming the NHL star everyone projected, for allowing his life to spiral out of control. It has been one heck of a journey, but he's in a good place. H

2025 OFF-SEASON

WINNERS & LOSERS

Thanks to the rising salary cap, this summer was a relative dud. But some teams still managed to gain ground while others slipped back

BY RYAN KENNEDY

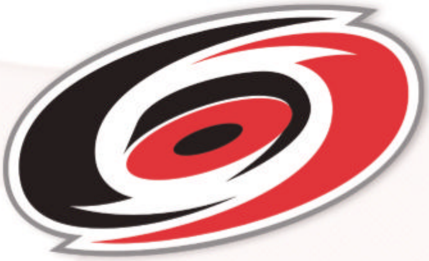
WHILE JULY 1 IS always a holiday north of the border, it has become a dual celebration over the past two decades or so thanks to NHL free agency, which happens to fall on Canada Day. It's a whirlwind of activity if you happen to work in the industry, but when the dust settled on that first day of action, it became quite apparent that the ground really hadn't shifted that much around the NHL landscape. There was definitely a feeling of *"Did anything really happen today?"*

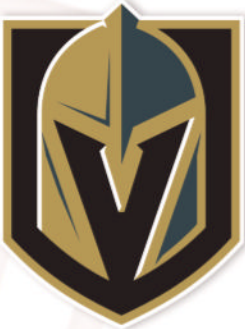
Sure, there were signings, but a lot of them were re-signings, with teams choosing to extend the talent they already knew instead of venturing out into the unknown. There was a blockbuster trade in the lead-up to July 1, when the Toronto Maple Leafs sent Mitch Marner to the Vegas Golden Knights in a sign-and-trade – but that was all done before free agency officially opened.

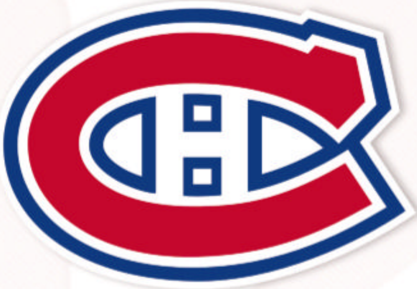
The obvious answer for this development is the salary cap. The NHL had announced in January that the cap was going up by $7.5 million – to $95.5 million – and would continue to go up in the coming years, giving teams more room to keep their own assets. And if you were a pending free agent, the pull of big dollars elsewhere was now mitigated by the fact you could get a fat cheque from the team you already played for, thus staying in a city you're familiar with in a dressing room you're already comfortable in.

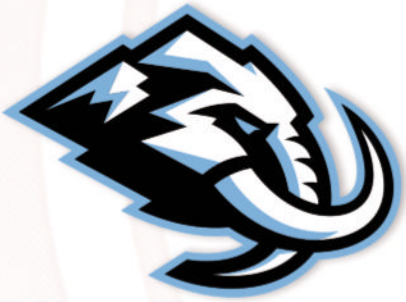
This made the free-agency board a lot less star-powered than first thought. Obviously, Marner was off the market, while Brock Boeser followed when he re-signed in Vancouver. Nikolaj Ehlers was the biggest name to change addresses, going from Winnipeg to Carolina, but he didn't have a lot of company behind him. Heck, the Stanley Cup champions didn't even get raided. No one thought the Panthers could keep Aaron Ekblad, Sam Bennett *and* Brad Marchand, yet Florida GM Bill Zito got it done. Success and sunshine will do that.

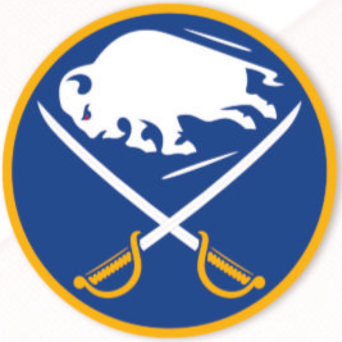
Even so, some teams did better than others. We've already mentioned Florida, but who were some of the other winners of the off-season? We picked four teams that understood their assignments and put themselves in positive positions. On the other hand, we also had to pick on four franchises that didn't do enough (or did the wrong things) and could be in for painful campaigns. Here's a look at our annual summer winners and losers.

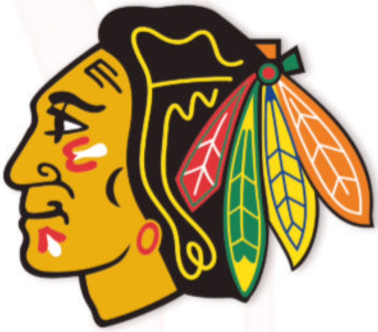


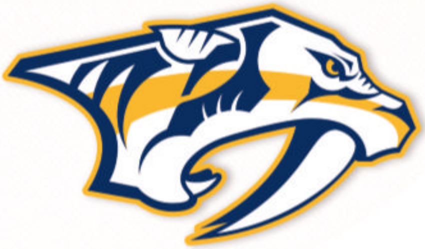


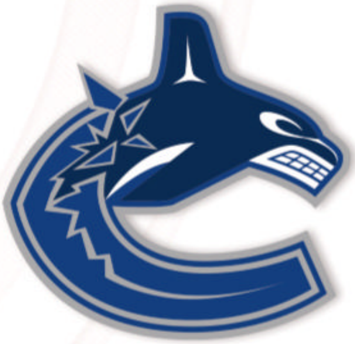












WINNERS

NIKOLAJ **EHLERS**

CAROLINA HURRICANES

THE HURRICANES WERE REPORTEDLY IN THE hunt for Mitch Marner, but they still ended up with the second-biggest name available, so, of course, they land in the win column. The Hurricanes were already one of the best teams in the East, and now they've added some more scoring punch in erstwhile Jets left winger Nikolaj Ehlers. While not every player can adjust to Carolina's systems under coach Rod Brind'Amour, Ehlers has the advantage of coming from another systems team in Winnipeg, so he will have a leg up. Elsewhere, the Canes replaced defenseman Brent Burns (who signed in Colorado) with K'Andre Miller – acquired via trade with the Rangers. Miller is substantially younger than Burns, and while they're not the same type of blueliner, Miller is a fine replacement at this point in his career.

While we're focused on the short term here, it's important to note how GM Eric Tulsky has set Carolina up for the future as well. Thanks to several recent contract extensions (including an eight-year pact with Jackson Blake), the entire Canes core is locked up through 2026-27, with no one making more than Sebastian Aho's $9.7 million per year.

MONTREAL CANADIENS

BY PARLAYING A SIZZLING SECOND HALF into a playoff spot, the Canadiens pushed their timeline forward, and GM Kent Hughes rewarded his charges by swinging a blockbuster deal at the draft, acquiring a top-pair defenseman from the Islanders in Noah Dobson. Though the price was two first-rounders, Montreal is in no need of youth. The Habs' pipeline is already full and has borne significant fruit in the form of Lane Hutson and Ivan Demidov, to name just a couple of the burgeoning stars. Speaking of Hutson, he'll get a boost from the presence of Dobson, who can also move the puck with aplomb, providing cover for the youngster as he continues to acclimate in his second NHL season.

Hughes also strengthened his forward corps with the acquisition of Zack Bolduc from St. Louis, who took a big step as a two-way threat with the Blues last season. The price for the 22-year-old was Logan Mailloux – well worth it given the glut of defensemen already in Montreal.

While Montreal's underlying numbers were poor last season, Nick Suzuki's post-4 Nations Face-Off revenge tour and Sam Montembeault's solid goaltending helped propel the team into the post-season. Now, they'll look to build on that success – with an even better lineup.

COLE CAUFIELD **& NOAH DOBSON**

EHLERS: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-IMAGN IMAGES; DOBSON: ERIC BOLTE-IMAGN IMAGES

VEGAS
GOLDEN KNIGHTS

BIG-GAME HUNTING IS WHAT THEY DO IN VEGAS, and GM Kelly McCrimmon bagged another buck with the sign-and-trade for Mitch Marner. Marner, a 100-point two-way threat who kills penalties, comes over from Toronto, where a lack of playoff success had fans at full boil. But in Vegas, Marner joins a cast that already has many champions on the roster. Sure, there will be pressure to live up to his new $12-million cap hit, but with Jack Eichel, Mark Stone and Tomas Hertl also on the roster, Marner doesn't have to be everything all at once for the Golden Knights.

The Knights bolstered the bottom six, too, with versatile center Colton Sissons, who came over with shot-blocking defenseman Jeremy Lauzon in a trade with Nashville that sent blueliner Nic Hague the other way.

The bad news for Vegas is that star 35-year-old D-man Alex Pietrangelo is pegged to miss the entire campaign due to injury, which is a significant blow to the back end. But with all the great two-way forwards Vegas employs – particularly with Marner now in the fold – there's no reason to discount the Golden Knights as one of the NHL's best teams and a Stanley Cup threat.

MITCH
MARNER

UTAH
MAMMOTH

HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR KEY INJURIES on the blueline last year (Sean Durzi and John Marino being the most prominent), perhaps Utah would have made the playoffs in its first year in Salt Lake City. Now officially known as the Mammoth, Utah's team is in a better position to make that post-season charge. In acquiring right winger JJ Peterka from Buffalo, the Mammoth added a young weapon just entering his prime. Peterka had 68 points for the Sabres last year, a total that would have ranked him second on Utah behind only captain Clayton Keller. With Dylan Guenther and Logan Cooley making big offensive leaps, the Mammoth's attack is looking a lot more potent. The addition of Brandon Tanev up front will also help defensively. Simply put, the forward corps has a lot more definition now.

And bringing in Nate Schmidt and Vitek Vanecek from Florida adds two more Stanley Cup winners to the lineup while strengthening the back end and goalie depth.

MAMMOTH ADDITION
Peterka brings another element to a Utah attack that looks less wooly and more bully.

MARNER: JOHN E. SOKOLOWSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; PETERKA: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

LOSERS

MICHAEL
KESSELRING

BUFFALO
SABRES

WE TAKE NO PLEASURE IN THIS, BUT IT LOOKS like it will be another rough season for Sabres fans. Buffalo was one of the worst teams in the East last year and did not improve over the summer. Trading right winger JJ Peterka to Utah leaves a hole in the top six that young Josh Doan (who came over in the deal from the Mammoth) cannot be expected to fill right away. Big defenseman Michael Kesselring, the other part of the Peterka deal, will help the blueline, but will that be enough to help a franchise that finished bottom three in goals against last season? The Sabres signed Alex Lyon as their second goaltender to complement Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, but, again, is that enough to move the dial?

The problem for the Sabres is that they can't just be as good or even a little better than they were last season. They need to be a lot better in order to snag a playoff spot for the first time in more than a decade. And with Detroit and Montreal improving, Buffalo's chances in the Atlantic are daunting. Jeff Skinner's buyout number would make him the sixth-highest-paid forward on the team right now, and that number goes *up* next season.

CHICAGO
BLACKHAWKS

IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE CONNOR Bedard era in Chicago, GM Kyle Davidson had busy off-seasons, bringing in veterans to help his phenom get used to the NHL. It didn't particularly work either time, though Nick Foligno is the captain and a great voice to have in the room. This summer, Davidson was quiet – and despite the change in strategy, it still feels like a loss. Chicago is nowhere near as strong as most of its Central Division rivals, and the only hope for a shock is internal growth from the likes of Bedard, Frank Nazar, Artyom Levshunov and Sam Rinzel.

Chicago traded Seth Jones to Florida at the deadline, so the Hawks enter the season weaker on the blueline than last year – a stunning and scary proposition. And while Jonathan Toews' return is one of the best stories in years, it has to hurt a little that he chose his hometown Winnipeg Jets (which totally makes sense, given that connection and the fact the Jets are Stanley Cup contenders) over the only NHL team he had ever suited up for. Imagine what kind of role model he would have been for Bedard.

STILL WORK TO DO
Bedard's Hawks are an underpowered bunch among the Central Division's elite squads.

KESSELRING: STEVE ROBERTS-IMAGN IMAGES; BEDARD: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

NASHVILLE
PREDATORS

THE PREDATORS ARE IN A SIMILAR situation as Chicago, lagging behind in the buzzsaw that is the Central Division. This time last year, we thought Nashville was a winner thanks to the splashy additions of Steven Stamkos, Jonathan Marchessault and Brady Skjei. Unfortunately, GM Barry Trotz had his gambit fail, as the Preds cratered in the standings and, shockingly, couldn't score to save their lives. Nashville finished second last in the league in offense, besting only the Sharks. Stamkos and Marchessault both went from 40-plus goals with their previous teams to settling in the 20s with the Predators.

This off-season brought a lot less change, with the major headline being the trade that sent center Colton Sissons and defenseman Jeremy Lauzon to Vegas in exchange for towering blueliner Nic Hague. Does the 2-for-1 swap make Nashville better? It's hard to find an argument that it does, unless the conditional draft pick (a third-rounder that could become a second) in 2027 that Nashville also procured in the swap turns out to be a home run. But that doesn't help this year's edition of the Preds, does it?

STEVEN **STAMKOS**

IS KANE ABLE?
Kane could bring secondary scoring to the Canucks, but there are big red flags.

VANCOUVER
CANUCKS

ON THE SURFACE, THE CANUCKS TOOK CARE OF business during the free-agent season. They re-signed Conor Garland and Brock Boeser – which was a little surprising given the organization's sometimes rocky relationship with the scoring winger – while also inking starting netminder Thatcher Demko to a contract extension that runs until the summer of 2029. But they also lost key penalty-killer Pius Suter on the open market, not to mention bang-and-crasher Dakota Joshua and goalie Arturs Silovs to trades. Silovs was expendable thanks to the presence of Demko and Kevin Lankinen, but the loss of those two forwards will hurt Vancouver's overall effectiveness.

The biggest wild card is Evander Kane, the hometown kid acquired from Edmonton for a fourth-round pick. Kane has those desirable power-forward traits, but he found himself on the wrong side of the line too often in the Stanley Cup final. If things go right, Kane will give the Canucks a much-needed scoring threat besides Boeser. But if they go wrong, he could also prove to be a distraction in a city that has seen a lot of drama lately.

Even if we regard Vancouver's summer moves as neutral, keep in mind this was not a playoff team last season. And with other teams in the West improving, the Canucks will have to hope Kane is a net positive over Suter and Joshua combined. H

STAMKOS: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES; KANE: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

#93 / RIGHT WING

MITCH MARNER

TEAM **VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS**

DIVISION **PACIFIC**

FULL HOUSE

Since entering the NHL, the Vegas Golden Knights have been one of the league's most dangerous and complete teams. But with the addition of Mitch Marner, the question will be posed as to who can stop them

BY RYAN KENNEDY

LET'S FACE THE FACTS: no one goes big-game hunting like the Vegas Golden Knights. If there is even a possibility that the organization can get its hands on an elite talent, GM Kelly McCrimmon and president of hockey operations George McPhee have figured out a way to make it happen. Mark Stone, Jack Eichel and Tomas Hertl – it's an impressive list. Now, the Golden Knights have added Mitch Marner to that group. And of all the players who moved addresses over the summer, no one will be watched as closely as the former Toronto Maple Leafs right winger.

Part of the 'Core Four' in Toronto with Auston Matthews, John Tavares and William Nylander, Marner put up incredible numbers with the Maple Leafs, while also establishing himself as one of the best two-way forwards in the league, especially on the penalty kill. But years of falling short in the playoffs put a bull's-eye on his back, and when the Leafs collapsed against Florida in the second round this past May, Marner's final shift in blue and white ended with a cascade of boos from the fans who once lionized him.

A sign-and-trade right before the beginning of free agency shook up the hockey world and has Marner on the other side of the continent now, armed with an eight-year, $96-million deal and a new lease on life. And Vegas could not be happier. "With every decision we make, it's about building a team that can win the Stanley Cup," McCrimmon said. "You have to have people in all roles and positions in your lineup to win. With Marner, we're getting one of the best forwards in the NHL. He's an elite playmaker and a tremendous passer, and over the past four seasons, he's averaged over 30 goals and 100 points. He's dynamic, and our fans will love this player. He adds to our offense and gives us another star, which we really feel is important."

According to agent Darren Ferris, Marner easily could have made more money if he had gone to free agency on July 1, but

BOB FRID/TIMOTHY T. LUDWIG-IMAGN IMAGES

25/10/07

DEPARTING
TORONTO, ON

DESTINATION
LAS VEGAS, NV

ROBERT EDWARDS/MARK J. REBILAS-IMAGN IMAGES

#93 / RIGHT WING

MITCH MARNER

TEAM
VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

DIVISION
PACIFIC

COMING HOME
Marner will play his first game in Toronto as the enemy when Vegas visits in January.

his client was laser-focused on Vegas from the get-go. "I had to respect his decision," Ferris said. "Free agency was a tool on the table, but, ultimately, Mitch's heart was set on Vegas. While there were higher dollars out there elsewhere, the tax structure in Vegas and the long-term stability made it a top-end outcome for him. He wanted a place where he could focus on playing the game he loves, where his family could feel safe and supported and where he had a real chance to compete for a Stanley Cup. That's why he (initially) wanted to stay. He thought Toronto had a great chance."

As it turns out, talks of Marner to Vegas had been going on for a while. McCrimmon said a possible three-team swap initiated by Toronto had emerged before the trade deadline but ultimately fell through. Other teams were obviously interested in the right winger as well. "It really hit on trade-deadline day," Marner said. "The day prior, we got offered a trade to go somewhere else, and my wife was seven or eight months pregnant at the time. We weren't going to go somewhere that might have been a short stint. If we were going somewhere, we were going to raise our child there."

> "With Mitch Marner, we're getting **one of the best forwards in the NHL**
>
> **–GOLDEN KNIGHTS GM KELLY MCCRIMMON**

Family has been a big driver for Marner. He now has a baby boy, Miles, and he and wife Stephanie wanted a good place to raise him. Having talked to ex-Knights-turned-Leafs Max Pacioretty and Ryan Reaves, Marner got a sense of what the city of Las Vegas – and more specifically, the Summerlin area where many players live – would provide in terms of schools and safety. That second one became a problem in Toronto, as playoff failures sent fans over the edge and into scary territory. Some found out where Marner lived and, according to his agent, would throw trash on his lawn – or worse. "At the end of every year, we had to put police out front because of threats," Ferris said.

Being in the hockey fishbowl that is Toronto didn't help, either. "There was a mental toll with the media and social media. Not just on Mitch but on his family," Ferris said. "It seemed to be constant. Even when he was leading in points, it didn't matter. Every game and shift got magnified, and that spilled over to his family. He's a son, a brother and a father. Throughout that, he showed tremendous maturity and focus."

Of course, Marner's detractors would point to the lack of playoff success Toronto had during his tenure and the right winger's inability to produce when the pressure was at its most suffocating. In the final four games of the series against Florida, Marner had just one assist. The Panthers won three of those contests to eliminate the Leafs.

No doubt there is still a haunting in Toronto of what could have been, but luckily for Marner, he doesn't have to worry about that in Vegas. The Golden Knights have been to the top of the mountain and could very easily get back to parade status this year. "You want to hoist that Stanley Cup," Marner said. "This team has shown they can do it. I'm lucky enough to now, hopefully, bring another piece in to help bring it back here. That's where I want to be. I want to be in a winning situation."

Not only will he be in that situation, but he'll have a confident crew surrounding him. Coach Bruce Cassidy helmed Vegas'

TOP: DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: WINSLOW TOWNSON-IMAGN IMAGES

title run and knows Marner from the 4 Nations Face-Off, where both won gold with Team Canada. Funny enough, Marner had no problems coming through in the clutch at that tournament, as he set up Connor McDavid's tourney-winning OT goal against Team USA. "I played against him a lot when he was in Boston, and he's always been a high-end coach," Marner said. "Getting to know him personally at the 4 Nations was awesome, and his help on the power play throughout that tournament was amazing. He's a very down-to-earth guy. He talks very calmly and listens to your points, too. Those are the conversations you want to have with a coach, being able to express yourself and let him express himself and find those areas you can help each other."

As for linemates, it isn't much of a stretch to imagine Marner being placed on the top line with Eichel in Vegas. Marner made magic with Matthews – another big American pivot – in Toronto, and Eichel has developed into a very similar two-way threat with elite offense. "He's an exceptional player and a guy who really moves well up and down the ice," Marner said. "He's very responsible. He has a deadly shot, with vision and playmaking as well. I'm very excited to start working with him and figure out the chemistry quickly. I've talked to a couple guys who have been teammates with him who have said unbelievable things about him as a human, so I'm very much looking forward to being in the dressing room with him."

Eichel can empathize with Marner about being scorned by the franchise he grew up in – he had a similarly tough exit from Buffalo. Whether or not they play together on a line remains to be seen. "Somebody's gonna have to shoot, right?" McCrimmon said. "I don't know if they'll play together. Those are decisions Bruce will make. But Mitch is also one of the best defensive players in the NHL. He's a threat shorthanded. Like Jack, Mark Stone and William Karlsson, these are tremendous two-way players. There's no cheating for offense in Mitch's game. His play without the puck, his anticipation, his ability to knock pucks down – he's an elite, responsible two-way player."

> "Free agency was a tool on the table, but, ultimately, **Mitch's heart was set on Vegas**
>
> **–MARNER'S AGENT DARREN FERRIS**

TOP: NICK TURCHIARO-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

And while McCrimmon maintains that there is internal pressure in Vegas to win, at least Marner won't have the biggest fan base and media contingent in the league breathing down his neck anymore – well, until the Golden Knights visit Toronto again.

It will be interesting to see what kind of reception Marner gets when his new team plays against the Maple Leafs, but the NHL schedule-makers did him a big favor this year: Vegas plays in Boston the day before its Jan. 23 visit to Toronto, so there likely won't be a morning skate. That means reporters will have to wait until after the game to speak with Marner.

Regardless, a lot has changed for Marner in the past months, and, undoubtedly, he's going to want to let his play on the ice do the talking. "He's in a great place right now, mentally," Ferris said. "Playing in Toronto came with an enormous spotlight, and he learned how to manage that pressure. He's built a tremendous resilience and doesn't let the outside noise dictate his mindset anymore. Becoming a father has given him perspective and balance. I think he's going to explode. It was like when he first got to Toronto. He's back to the old Mitch." H

#19 / CENTER

JONATHAN TOEWS

TEAM
WINNIPEG JETS

DIVISION
CENTRAL

LEFT: JEROME MIRON/JAMES GUILLORY-IMAGN IMAGES

‘IT JUST FELT RIGHT’

More than two years removed from NHL play – and after a harrowing battle with chronic illness – Jonathan Toews didn’t need a rational reason to come home. He just had to follow his heart

BY KEN CAMPBELL

IT WAS SUCH A big deal that the premier of Manitoba and the mayor of Winnipeg were there, with many minions in tow, chronicling the event so they could show the hardworking folks exactly how their tax dollars are being spent. About 50 season-ticket holders won a contest to be there, too, and they cheered. Loudly. All because Jonathan Toews put a hockey sweater over his head. It was pretty monumental for the guest of honor, too, who hadn’t heard cheers like that since he played in Marian Hossa’s retirement charity game in Slovakia almost two years ago. At one point, Toews looked at Andree Gilbert, a wonderful ball of energy who was beaming in the front row and waving, and said, “Hi, Mom.”

If you’re getting the idea that Jonathan Toews being repatriated to his hometown team is a rather enormous development, well, like Andree Gilbert, your mother didn’t raise no dummy. That Toews is a big deal in his home province might have occurred to you in 2010, when they named a lake near Flin Flon after him. Yeah, a lake. Or when the Dakota Community Centre, in the St. Vital neighborhood where Toews grew up, was renamed the Jonathan Toews Sportsplex in 2014. Or when he received the Order of Manitoba a year later, joining Sheldon Kennedy and Reggie Leach as the only other hockey players to be recognized. (Jets

RIGHT: TERRENCE LEE/JAMIE SABAU-IMAGN IMAGES

#19 / CENTER

JONATHAN TOEWS

TEAM
WINNIPEG JETS

DIVISION
CENTRAL

chairman Mark Chipman and *Hockey Night in Canada* host Scott Oake are also members.)

STANLEY TO SHELF
After playing in the 2020 bubble playoffs, Toews missed the entire 2020-21 season due to long COVID.

Just to be clear, there have been some pretty good hockey players to come out of Winnipeg over the years. Bill Mosienko (who scored the fastest hat trick in NHL history), Terry Sawchuk, Andy Bathgate, Babe Pratt and Ken Reardon each have their receipts from the Hockey Hall of Fame. And Mark Stone and Seth Jarvis are ripping it up pretty good in the NHL these days. But none of them ever played big-league hockey in 'The Peg.' By our count, fewer than 20 local heroes have played for any one of the three iterations of the Jets – the WHA outfit and the NHL Jets 1.0 and 2.0 – and most of them fall into the "we-barely-knew-ye" category. One exception is goalie Joe Daley, who played more than 300 games with the WHA team and won three Avco Cups. There was one guy named Danny Johnson who played three seasons for the WHA Jets, and he was from Winnipegosis. Never heard of that place before. In fact, it sounds more like the affliction that befalls NHL players who put the Jets on their do-not-trade lists than it does an actual city.

> "It really got to a point where I couldn't **see myself wearing any other jersey**
>
> **– JONATHAN TOEWS ON COMING HOME TO WINNIPEG**

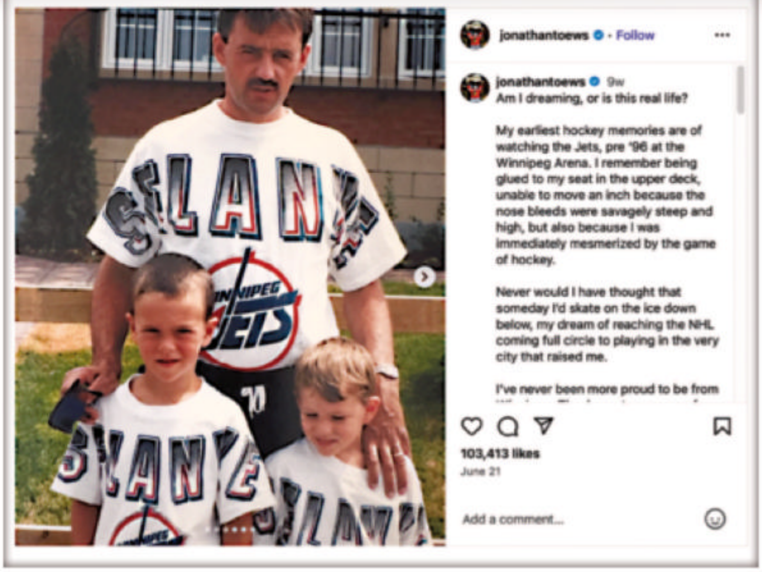
Even though Toews has been out of the game for two years and has suffered some debilitating health issues, he probably could have gone somewhere a little warmer. Or where he'd be taxed a little less. Or where he could go out to dinner without being stared at. But he chose the Jets, who signed him to a one-year deal worth $2 million. With bonuses, that figure could jump as high as $7 million if the Jets win the Stanley Cup and Toews is a regular contributor. And wouldn't that be something?

In the end, the decision wasn't really a decision at all. And it didn't even really have to make any sense. "It really got to a point where I couldn't see myself wearing any other jersey," Toews told reporters the day he was introduced in early July. "It wasn't something where you write down the pros and cons on a piece of paper. To me, it wasn't rational at all. It was more of an intuitive thing, where it just felt right. You can go over the million reasons why, but I didn't have to call my mom or dad or my brother – anyone really. I just knew in my heart that this is what I wanted to do. So it felt good every step of the way."

When John Tavares realized his dream of signing with his hometown team in 2018, he sent out a pic-

LEFT: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

> “I just knew in my heart that this is what I wanted to do. **So it felt good every step of the way**
>
> **– JONATHAN TOEWS**



jonathantoews · Follow

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Am I dreaming, or is this real life?

My earliest hockey memories are of watching the Jets, pre '96 at the Winnipeg Arena. I remember being glued to my seat in the upper deck, unable to move an inch because the nose bleeds were savagely steep and high, but also because I was immediately mesmerized by the game of hockey.

Never would I have thought that someday I'd skate on the ice down below, my dream of reaching the NHL coming full circle to playing in the very city that raised me.

I've never been more proud to be from

103,413 likes
June 21

Add a comment...

PAST BECOMES PRESENT
Toews showed his excitement for joining his hometown team by posting a childhood photo to Instagram.

BOTTOM: TOM SZCZERBOWSKI-IMAGN IMAGES, RIGHT: @JONATHANTOEWS ON INSTAGRAM

ture on social media of himself sleeping as a little fellow on his Toronto Maple Leafs bedsheets, which triggered an entire fan base on Long Island. When Toews signed with Winnipeg, he posted a photo of himself, his father and his little brother in garish Jets T-shirts that had SELANNE emblazoned across the chest from arm cuff to arm cuff. The only reason someone isn’t currently doing hard time for that crime against fashion is that it was the ’90s, and, for some reason, people thought that actually looked good.

Toews’ is a feel-good story by any metric. If his unconventional healing journey means he has recovered enough from Chronic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (CIRS) and long COVID to the point he can make a meaningful contribution to the Jets in their quest for a long playoff run, there’s the potential for some magical moments. (Who knows, if Toews comes out of the gates blazing, does Team Canada Olympic GM Doug Armstrong consider him for the role as the 13th forward in Milan?)

At the very worst, the 37-year-old future Hall of Famer gets an opportunity to go out on his own terms with the team he grew up worshipping. Nothing wrong with that. “I’m not going to sit here and talk about goals and assists and all that,” Toews said. “Ultimately, I will try my best to be honest and realistic with myself as far as what the challenges are. Since I hit the ice and have really been skating these last months, it didn’t feel like that much time had gone by. It is a long time on paper if you are playing hockey. I’m trying to be realistic about what the challenges are.”

One of the biggest challenges for Toews, aside from tempering expectations, will be maintaining the on-ice pace among the best players in the world after missing two seasons while already in his mid-30s in a league that certainly didn’t get any slower in his absence.

And even though there are some examples of Hall of Fame players sitting on the sidelines for at least two seasons at that point in their careers, it’s not a large sample size. Gordie Howe first retired from the NHL just after turning 43 and sat out two years, then dominated the WHA when he came back as a 45-year-old – even playing a final NHL season at 51 after six in the WHA. Mario Lemieux missed three seasons after his first retirement at 31, then came back and was spectacular. Even though he suited up for only 170 of the 324 games Pittsburgh played between his re-debut and his curtain call in his final five NHL seasons, he scored 229 points in that time.

Conversely, Guy Lafleur retired for three seasons at 33 and was just OK when he came back. Dickie Moore sat out two years and returned to join the expansion St. Louis Blues at 36, and it became clear pretty quickly he simply didn’t have it.

But none of those players, including Lemieux, came back at that age from such debilitating circumstances. In reality, Toews

#19 / CENTER

JONATHAN TOEWS

TEAM **WINNIPEG JETS** DIVISION **CENTRAL**

hasn't been himself for about five years. Don't forget that prior to playing his final two seasons with the Blackhawks, Toews missed the entire truncated 2020-21 season due to a case of long COVID that made it almost impossible for him to get out of bed on some days. He struggled along with the Blackhawks for the next two seasons before becoming a UFA, but he never ended up going to market. Because he simply couldn't. The affliction Toews has cannot be cured because it's a syndrome, not a disease, usually associated with exposure to biotoxins. And it's one that not only left him unable to prepare for or perform in the NHL but also feeling confused and confounded.

> “I realized, with or without hockey, I wanted to take care of my body. **I had kind of accepted I might not play again**
>
> **– JONATHAN TOEWS**

Still, they don't call him 'Captain Serious' for nothing. Despite the setbacks, Toews took control of his health, and he now sounds like someone who has a new lease on life. The journey was unconventional, and Toews left no stone unturned, drastically altering his lifestyle and diet. His quest for health took him on an *Eat, Pray, Love*-type of odyssey to India, where he immersed himself in a practice called Ayurveda, undergoing a five-week detox known as Panchakarma, which is designed to release the toxins stored in the body – toxins that were making him ill.

Toews occasionally talked about his healing journey in India, which included mud baths, pain-inducing massages, yoga sessions, fire-prayer ceremonies and pooping. Lots of pooping. “I realized that, with or without hockey, I wanted to take care of my body,” Toews said. “I wanted to do the right

TOP: JAMES CAREY LAUDER-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: MARC DESROSIERS-IMAGN IMAGES

When Toews steps out onto the ice in October, it will be his first game action in more than two calendar years.

> “You’re going to pay attention because he’s lived it, he’s done it, and **he’s won everywhere that he’s been**
>
> **– JETS COACH SCOTT ARNIEL**

things. I wanted to let life go where it’s supposed to go. I got to the point where I pretty much needed to get myself off a timeline to return. So, in my mind, I had kind of accepted in a way that I might not return to play again. And while it was a challenging thing to do, at the same time, a very healthy thing to do, to wake up every day and not think, ‘This is where we’re going.’ ”

That’s pretty un-Captain-Serious-like. But it worked. After accepting life on life’s terms, Toews began to get healthy. More strength led to longer workouts, which led to feeling good on the ice, which led to Toews believing he could still play in the NHL and make an impact.

And if he’s right, the Jets will have strength to die for down the middle. Adam Lowry is expected to be out until at least the end of October after hip surgery, but when the Jets are whole, their top three centers are Mark Scheifele, Lowry and Toews. In Scheifele, the Jets have a play-driving talent. In Lowry, they have a two-way demon who fights for every inch of the ice and makes every shift as fun as taking on Nick Tarnasky on the golf course. And in Toews, the Jets potentially have another guy who can tilt the ice at both ends and provide the kind of experience and guidance they need. There is nothing Toews has not seen during his career.

“Teams talk about being in those moments,” said Jets coach Scott Arniel. “That’s why those guys who have won championships, won Stanley Cups, are so important. We brought Luke Schenn in this year, and there were times where just him being around a Cup and having that experience and what he said (helped). If it’s one of our third-line players or one of our defensemen or if it’s Adam Lowry having a quiet conversation with him at dinner or in the dressing room, just picking his brain – to be able to do that just speeds up the process. You’re going to pay attention because he’s lived it, he’s done it, and he’s won everywhere that he’s been.”

Jets GM Kevin Cheveldayoff acknowledged that Chipman has dreamed of this scenario basically since the Jets returned to Winnipeg in 2011. And now, it’s reality – at least for one season. Maybe more. The Jets have done a remarkable job of keeping players around, but they haven’t been able to keep them all. After 10 seasons, Nikolaj Ehlers took advantage of free agency and left, but the acquisition of Toews has helped remove some of the sting from that departure. Contrary to the words of Thomas Wolfe, you can actually go home again.

Toews really has nothing to prove, and this is a low-risk investment for the Jets, too. It will take some time to adjust to Toews not wearing the Blackhawks’ uniform, but the hockey world has had two years to ease itself into that reality. Toews is in a good place with his health and outlook. And he’s in a great place when it comes to putting the final touches on his career, regardless of how it turns out. Someday, there will probably be a statue of Toews outside the United Center, like there is of Dale Hawerchuk in front of the Canada Life Centre in Winnipeg. But for now, Toews is focused on the new sweater, not the old one.

“Things change,” he said. “And it is for the best sometimes.” H

TOP: JEROME MIRON-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: DAVID BANKS-IMAGN IMAGES

#53 / DEFENCE
NOAH DOBSON

TEAM
MONTREAL CANADIENS

DIVISION
ATLANTIC

GETTING THE GREEN LIGHT

DAVID KIROUAC/SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

Noah Dobson had an awfully exciting summer. And while the blueliner is coming off a tough year, it sure seems he and the Canadiens will form the perfect marriage in Montreal

BY KEN CAMPBELL

WE CAN BE reasonably certain that Noah Dobson is super excited and excited and extremely excited to get the 2025-26 season going with the Montreal Canadiens.

We know this because he used those terms a total of 17 times in a 15-minute, six-second interview on the day he was dealt there and signed a contract extension that will keep him in Montreal for the next eight years. (Breakdown: 'super excited' eight times, 'excited' seven times and 'extremely excited' twice.) He said an additional five times that he's looking forward to next season, which probably means he's super excited or, at the very least, extremely excited. He also used the word 'obviously' 16 times during the availability, because hockey player.

Well, duh, of course Dobson is obviously super extremely excited and looking forward to playing in Montreal this season. First, the 25-year-old got married July 1, effectively taking himself off the market on and off the ice in the space of three days. He and Alexa Serowik – daughter of former NHL journeyman defenseman Jeff Serowik (deep cut, no question) – were united in matrimony in the same Rhode Island church in which John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier tied the knot almost 72 years prior, followed by a '*Gatsby*-vibe' reception at the nearby Rosecliff Mansion, where guests were treated to a late-night snack of fries and grilled cheese sandwiches.

25/10/07

DEPARTING
LONG ISLAND, NY

DESTINATION
MONTREAL, QC

#53 / DEFENCE

NOAH DOBSON

TEAM
MONTREAL CANADIENS

DIVISION
ATLANTIC

Though Dobson put up 70 points in 2023-24, he believes he has more to offer than just his offensive game.

> “The way I look at it, a No. 1 center is the premier position in hockey, **and then, it’s a right-shot ‘D’**
>
> **– CANADIENS GM KENT HUGHES**

If that doesn’t scream exciting, consider Dobson will be making an average of $9.5 million across each of the next eight seasons – with $46 million of that $76-million total figure being paid over the first four years of the deal – and he’ll be entering his prime on a team and as part of a defense corps that has almost everyone in the hockey world just about as excited as he is. But what makes it so encouraging for everyone involved is what it represents, which is a turning of the corner for the most decorated franchise in NHL history.

Things were rough for a while there. Really rough. If we’re talking metamorphosis, getting a player of Dobson’s pedigree and locking him down indicates the Canadiens are far beyond the egg-and-larva rebuilding stage. They’re now in the latter portion of the pupa stage and are ready to emerge as a full-on contender adult. “From my vantage point, what we were able to do was go acquire a young, very talented, premium-position player,” said Canadiens GM Kent Hughes. “The way I look at it, and I’m sure people might have slightly different opinions of it, a No. 1 center is the premier position in hockey, and then, it’s a right-shot ‘D.’ We had the ability to do that and get this defenseman and do it for the most part with draft capital. And we didn’t love this draft.”

Well, Emil Heineman might have something to say about that draft-capital thing, but you get the idea. The Habs have talent to burn on the left wing, which made the 10-goal scorer expendable. Along with Heineman came the Canadiens’ 2025 first-round pick and the selection immediately before it, which Montreal received from Calgary for taking on Sean Monahan in 2022.

After years of being very bad, Montreal had amassed more than enough picks and prospects and was willing to move some of them for a player who could accelerate its rebuild. And the Habs found their man in Dobson, a player whose skill set meshes well with the philosophy coach Martin St-Louis preaches for his D-men: moving the puck up the ice and activating from the blueline. “I’ve been able to produce offensively and have had great offensive seasons, but that’s not only what I want to be known for,” Dobson said. “I want to be a complete D-man who can play in all situations, defend with my hockey sense, my skating and my good stick detail. That’s something that can maybe get overlooked with the offensive production, but I want to be known to play a 200-foot game and be reliable in all three zones.”

Yeah, about that. Dobson wanting to be a complete D-man and actually being one are two different things. It’s a little tricky to

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

peg Dobson these days, considering he had an off-the-charts offensive year in 2023-24, then seemed to struggle at both ends of the ice last season. He is unlikely to regularly turn in seasons quite as good as his 2023-24 campaign, but both Dobson and the Habs are counting on the fact he'll be better than he was in his 2024-25 contract year.

For what it's worth, former teammate Cal Clutterbuck chimed in on a podcast – prior to the trade, when Dobson's future was still very uncertain. And while Clutterbuck does have a vested interest as an analyst on the Islanders' MSG broadcast, his assessment of his former teammate was noted. "One thing that I might have been a little bit gun-shy with Noah is just his ability to defend hard and just be strong enough to contain some of the best players on the other team," Clutterbuck said. "Like when (Florida's Aleksander) Barkov comes in, can you handle him? Can you handle below the goal line? And he showed flashes of it, but he wasn't consistent with it. I think this year, he sacrificed a lot of his offensive side to really go out and show people he could be that (all-situations) guy."

If you're into connecting dots, you probably wouldn't be entirely off the mark if you thought there was something of a disconnect between Dobson and Islanders coach Patrick Roy. It's undeniable that Dobson's numbers dipped after Roy's arrival midway through 2023-24. Before the Isles fired Lane Lambert and hired Roy, Dobson was a point-per-game player, scoring six goals and 45 points in 45 games. After Roy's arrival, Dobson posted just four goals and 25 points in 34 games. This was despite the fact the Islanders moved up from sixth to third in the Metropolitan Division standings and scored more goals per game under Roy than they did under Lambert.

In the one full season Dobson had with Roy at the helm, the D-man posted his worst offensive numbers since his 2020-21 sophomore year, with 39 points in 71 games. "It was a difficult season at times as a whole," Dobson said. "Not just individually but as a team. We struggled to score a lot collectively and as a team, especially earlier in the year. Obviously, you want things to be going well all the time, but you've got to find ways when things aren't going well as a team to find a way out of that and produce offensively when you can. But when that's not happening, you've got to be reliable defensively as well."

As much as the Canadiens improved last season, their goal differential of minus-18 was easily the worst of any team that made the playoffs. The Canadiens are counting on Dobson to help at both ends of that equation, and the prospect of him on the first pairing with Kaiden Guhle to his left offers some really intriguing possibilities. The Canadiens want their defensemen to contest pucks all over the ice, which would make the Guhle-Dobson pairing even more effective.

PEOPLE
ROBERTSON
89

NICK TURCHIARO-IMAGN IMAGES

> "I think this year, he sacrificed a lot of his offensive side to go show people **that he could be that (all-situations) guy**
>
> **– MSG ANALYST CAL CLUTTERBUCK VIA PODCAST**

And as wonderful as Lane Hutson was last season, teams quickly realized he wasn't an NHL-caliber triggerman and adjusted to the Canadiens' power play accordingly. Dobson will supply the Canadiens with a shooting threat from the point, with either Cole Caufield or Patrik Laine on the left side, which will help Montreal become more dangerous with the man advantage. "One of the things that made Noah so appealing to us is he fits the makeup of our team and how we play and how 'Marty' would like to see them play," Hughes said. "It's a big difference for your forward group when your 'D' are able to move pucks up fast. Our power play was 31st for expected goals last year. Part of that is we don't shoot a lot. Your coaching staff has more weapons and choices in terms of, 'Oh, you want to do this? OK, well now Dobson is on the first power play and Lane is on the second.' Now, your second penalty kill is getting Lane dancing around, and Noah is bombing shots (on the first). We'll see what the coaches do with it, but it gives them options."

It presents the potential for an interesting confluence of a prime-aged defenseman and a team on the rise. They both have the next eight years to find out how it's all going to play out. "I love playing at the Bell Centre," Dobson said. "With the group of players they have there already and the talent they have on the team and what they've been building, I'm just super excited to join the group and add to it. I'm excited about what we can do in the future."

It all promises to be very exciting. Probably even super exciting. H

#77 / LEFT WING

JJ PETERKA

TEAM **UTAH MAMMOTH** · DIVISION **CENTRAL**

NOTHING VENTURED...

Mammoth GM Bill Armstrong couldn't help but enquire when he heard that JJ Peterka was available on the trade market. And he – and the Utah fan base – is very happy he did so

BY JARED CLINTON

LEFT: DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES, RIGHT: SERGEI BELSKI/NICK TURCHIARO-IMAGN IMAGES

THERE AREN'T MANY who will extol the virtues of the *National Enquirer*. That is, of course, because one would be hard pressed to associate the tabloid with virtuousness in the first place. But there is something to be said for the *Enquirer*'s cockroach-esque ability to maintain its place as a fixture of grocery-store checkouts. Trust, too, that its longevity has little to do with any reputation as a great bastion of journalistic integrity. Rather, it has survived by trading on one of humanity's great truths: we all love a little bit of gossip.

Bristle at the suggestion if you wish. Deny it if you must. But the cold reality is no one is immune to a bit of idle talk, and most certainly not those within the hockeysphere. Rumors have become part of the daily news cycle. There are whole accounts all across social media dedicated to aggregating and disseminating the latest tidbits. And our collective love of digging up the newest dirt even bleeds into television broadcasts, where entire intermission segments center around dissecting the latest chatter regarding this player's trade availability or that player's contract negotiations.

But much like understanding that the yarns spun in the *Enquirer* aren't worth the paper on which they are printed, an essential part of living in the age of off-ice gossip is learning to distinguish fact from fiction. For John Q. Public, that's not always an easy thing. Doing so requires a smidgen of media literacy and a working cow-excrement detector. For the media types, it's about leaning on well-placed sources. When you're an NHL GM, though? You set out to hear these things straight from the horse's mouth. And that is what brings us to Utah Mammoth GM Bill Armstrong.

Not unlike most rumor hounds, Armstrong couldn't help but raise an eyebrow when word trickled out that JJ Peterka was on the market. In three big-league seasons in Buffalo, Peterka had established himself as a legitimate top-six talent. He finished the 2024-25 campaign tied for second in scoring for the Sabres, and with Buffalo desperate to right the ship, Peterka seemed a no-brainer to remain a fixture of the team's lineup for years to come.

One can understand, then, why Armstrong was skeptical of the trade talk. "It's one of those things you ask those GMs when you're talking to them," Armstrong told reporters. " 'Is this true? Is there any life to this story?' Most times, there's none. But this particular one had some legs."

That's not to say mapping out a swap for Peterka was as simple as a single phone call. As Armstrong put it, acquiring the 23-year-old right winger "took some time to mature

25/10/07

DEPARTING
BUFFALO, NY

DESTINATION
SALT LAKE CITY, UT

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CCM
UTA
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BAUER

#77 / LEFT WING

JJ PETERKA

TEAM
UTAH MAMMOTH

DIVISION
CENTRAL

PETERKA
77
ATCO
adidas
CCM

> “It just shows how committed I am to Utah, **how excited I am and how much I believe in that group**
>
> **– JJ PETERKA ON SIGNING A FIVE-YEAR DEAL**

and get across the finish line.” When all was said and done, the Mammoth sent 23-year-old right winger Josh Doan and 25-year-old defenseman Michael Kesselring the Sabres' way in exchange for Peterka. The cherry on top? Peterka's almost-immediate commitment to the project in Utah.

An RFA at the time he was traded, Peterka signed a five-year, $38.5-million contract in the aftermath of his move to Utah. His $7.7-million cap hit makes him the franchise's highest-paid forward. “Sometimes, you talk to guys when they're traded to you and they're in shock,” Armstrong said. “(JJ) was expecting it and excited about coming to Utah.”

For Peterka, putting pen to paper was an easy choice, and that wasn't only because of the dollars-and-cents of it all. When the Mammoth (nee Hockey Club) touched down in Utah last summer, a move made on the back of the Arizona Coyotes' protracted relocation saga, Peterka took note of the reception they received. He was also blown away by the atmosphere when he visited with Buffalo last season. And this is to say nothing of the talent in the lineup. That the mountains of Salt Lake City had a way of making the Munich native feel at home didn't hurt either. Put it all together, and a long-term deal was a no-brainer. “It just shows how committed I am to Utah, how excited I am and how much I believe in that group – what they've got going and what they're building there,” Peterka said.

What the Mammoth are constructing – and have been dating back to their final days as the Coyotes – is a roster brimming with budding young stars. The squad appears poised to contend not just in the cutthroat Central Division but for a consistent spot in the Western Conference playoff picture.

But, as is evident by the fact Utah spent the 2024-25 season flitting in and out of wild-card contention before ultimately finishing on the outside looking in, the up-and-coming outfit is not without its flaws. “You always have to be aware of where you are in the build and where you're going,” Armstrong said. “Where we're going is we needed somebody in the top two lines that could put the puck in the net and could have that ability to have impact.”

That need was painfully apparent at times last season. At all strengths, Utah's ability to generate shots and scoring chances added up to the NHL's 10th-most expected goals (258.2). Even with Clayton Keller, Logan Cooley and Dylan Guenther in the lineup, though, Utah struggled to turn opportunities into actual offensive output. By season's end, the club's 240 goals tied for 20th in the NHL. And that's where Peterka comes in.

Though he has flown somewhat under the radar, Peterka has proven to be one of the league's most-lethal shooters over the past two seasons. Look no further than the rate at which he has outperformed his expected offensive numbers. Among the 500-plus skaters to play at least 1,500 minutes at all strengths since the start of 2023-24, Peterka ranks an impressive – though not necessarily awe-inspiring – 113th in the NHL, producing 41.5 expected goals. He's exceeded expectations, however, by netting 55 goals over that span.

And it's by that measure, the difference between expected and actual results, that Peterka has proven himself to be an exceptionally gifted finisher. Among that cohort of

LEFT: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

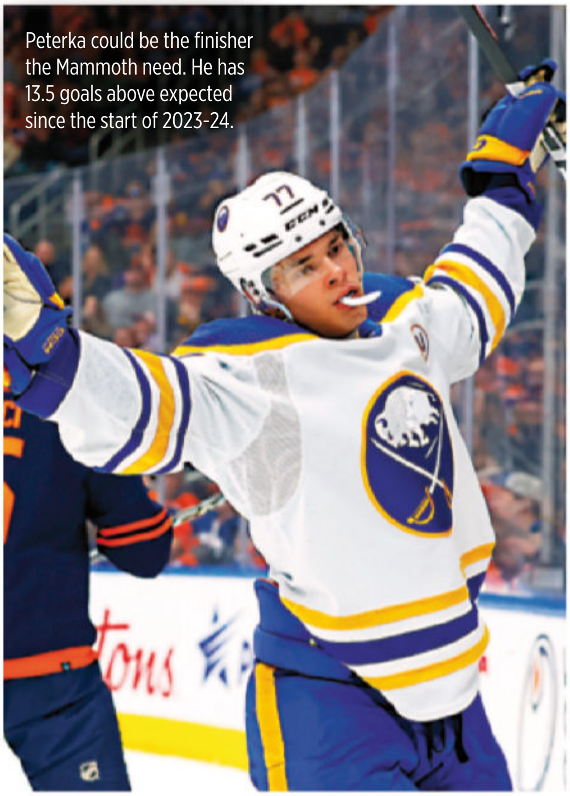
500-plus skaters, only 27 have outstripped their expected total by as much or more than Peterka's 13.5 goals above expected.

The same ability to deliver is apparent when measuring per hour of ice time, too.

Though he's not in the same stratosphere as compatriot Leon Draisaitl or former Sabres teammate Tage Thompson – who rank first and second with .60-plus goals more than expected per 60 minutes over the past two campaigns – Peterka has exceeded his expected per-hour goal production by .29 at all strengths. That tied him for 25th in the NHL over the past two campaigns. To put that into context, Peterka ranks ahead of Nathan MacKinnon, Jack Eichel and Filip Forsberg. It also puts Peterka level with or clear of the top players available this summer, which included Mitch Marner, Nikolaj Ehlers and Brock Boeser.

That alone would make Peterka a fit on any team in the league, of course. But what gives the Mammoth even greater confidence that Peterka will be especially suited to the organization is that his style fits the way coach Andre Tourigny wants his team to play: north-south and up-tempo. "The one thing I've learned about him from watching him over the years is he's got a unique ability to create a ton of speed down the wings," Armstrong said.

> It's one of those things you ask those GMs about. 'Is there any life to this story?' This particular one had some legs
>
> –UTAH GM BILL ARMSTRONG ON RUMORS OF PETERKA'S AVAILABILITY



Peterka could be the finisher the Mammoth need. He has 13.5 goals above expected since the start of 2023-24.

BOTTOM: PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES, RIGHT: BOB FRID-IMAGN IMAGES

That's an asset Peterka has honed over the years. In fact, it dates back to the days when playing in the NHL was nothing but a distant dream. Peterka grew up a multi-sport athlete, and he sounds like he's rattling off a list of Olympic events when naming his hobbies. His interest in multiple sporting disciplines led him to spend his winters balancing hockey with short-track speed skating. And while he eventually ditched the spandex bodysuit, the technique he learned on the oval remains to this day. "I was always one of the fastest guys, probably because of that," Peterka said. "Translating that to hockey wasn't too hard. Obviously, not as many turns, but for straight-line skating and that stuff, it really helps."

Despite Peterka's skill set and promising on-ice results, no one is expecting him to arrive and act as an immediate panacea for Utah's scoring woes, nor is he being heralded as the missing piece who will singlehandedly push the club into Stanley Cup contention. That's not the kind of pressure Armstrong wants to put on the youngster, either. This is all new for Peterka, who said getting traded was a "weird feeling." He'll have to put down new roots in a new city and without the benefit of any familiar faces – his lone personal connections are to Utah prospects and fellow German national-team players Maksymilian Szuber and Julian Lutz.

Once that bedding-in period is complete, though, and Peterka has become familiar with his new Mammoth teammates, the hope is he will be one of the driving forces who help Utah turn promise and potential into post-season hockey and perhaps even a championship run.

That could happen in short order. It could be in due time. But Peterka is confident that, sooner or later, on-ice success is in the cards for the club. "When you look at the roster and how many young players are there and already so good," Peterka said, "I think just timeline-wise, for me, it's going to be a perfect fit." H

#36 / GOALIE

JOHN GIBSON

TEAM
DETROIT RED WINGS

DIVISION
ATLANTIC

PRIORITY
NHL

25/10/07

DEPARTING
ANAHEIM, CA

DESTINATION
DETROIT, MI

TIM FULLER/ALEX GALLARDO-IMAGN IMAGES

GIBSON'S FINEST

The Red Wings are banking on their new No. 1 improving with age (like fine whiskey?) and recapturing the form that once made him one of the world's best keepers

BY JARED CLINTON

IN AN IDEAL WORLD – and some might suggest in a just one – John Gibson wouldn't have such a big chip on his shoulder. There's even an argument that he shouldn't have one in the first place. After all, by just about any measure, Gibson has had a charmed career.

But at his introductory press conference as a new member of the Detroit Red Wings, Gibson couldn't help but repeat that this is an opportunity to show that he has plenty left in the tank. Five times, he hit on some variation of that theme. He brought it up when talking about what excites him about heading to Hockeytown. He brought it up when he talked about his fit in the Red Wings' lineup. And he brought up again when talking about leaving Anaheim.

With that last one, Gibson wasn't striking an aggrieved tone or tenor. Not necessarily. The truth, however, is that the 32-year-old's departure from the Ducks, with whom he has spent every moment of his big-league career, has been a long time coming.

For the past few years, Gibson's name has been grist for the rumor mill, whether in-season or during the dog days of summer. There were moments when it seemed close. There was the moment when a public statement had to be made denying that he had demanded out of Anaheim. But what has long seemed *fait accompli* is now a reality. After more than 10 years, he's on the move from the white-sand beaches of Southern California to the blue-collar Motor City. "It's tough being in one place for so long, and you've got to say bye to a lot of close friendships with people within the organization and outside the organization," Gibson told reporters. "But me and my family are ready for the next chapter. I still feel like I've got a lot left to prove."

See? There Gibson goes, hinting at some unfinished business and sounding more like an upstart itching to make a name for himself than the well-credentialled keeper he is. And that phrase – "a lot to prove" – is going to come up again in these next 1,000-plus words. But maybe that's because there's something to it.

#36 / GOALIE

JOHN GIBSON

TEAM
DETROIT RED WINGS

DIVISION
ATLANTIC

In a number of ways, Gibson's reputation precedes him, and not without reason. Almost from the moment he arrived in the NHL in 2013-14, then just a fresh-faced 20-year-old, he has asserted himself as one of the world's most preternaturally gifted goaltenders. And his early trajectory was something to behold. First, he asserted himself as the next-in-line netminder for the Ducks. By the following campaign, he was a second-stringer. One season later, Gibson became a split-time starter and etched his name on the William M. Jennings Trophy alongside then-creasemate Frederik Andersen.

From that moment on, Gibson became the face of the Ducks' crease as he made good on projections he could one day become a franchise keeper. He rose to become Anaheim's all-time leader in games played by a goaltender. He worked his way to second all-time on the Ducks' win list, where he trails Jean-Sebastien Giguere by just two victories. His tenure in Anaheim was such that any debate about the greatest keeper in Ducks history is a two-horse race between Gibson and Giguere – and don't be so certain Gibson is the runner-up.

> “I just personally felt that **I had more to offer**
>
> **– JOHN GIBSON**

If that's the good, though, there has also been the bad.

In the immediate aftermath of Gibson putting pen to paper on an eight-year, $51.2-million contract extension in 2018, he had one of the best years of his career. But team success did not then and has not since followed. The Ducks missed the postseason in 2018-19 and in each year since. All the while, Gibson has lost more games than any other NHL goaltender over the past six seasons, missed 65 games due to injury and has, in recent years, felt competition breathing down his neck.

The latter was never more apparent than in the past two seasons, as the emergence of Lukas Dostal unsteadied Gibson's stranglehold on the crease. And between Gibson's absences and Anaheim's eagerness to find an heir to the blue paint, Dostal grabbed the starting reins last campaign and has since been crowned Gibson's successor.

About that – losing the starting gig he has held for a decade – there are no hard feelings, Gibson insisted. It did, however, drive home that it really was time to move on. “I just personally felt that I had more to offer,” Gibson said. “It's nothing against anybody there. They have their own way of looking at it. They've got a great young goalie in ‘Dosty’ coming up, and I'm super excited for him. But, at the end of the day, I've got to worry about what's good for my career. I felt like I needed a change of scenery, a fresh start, and I still feel like I have a lot to prove.”

But what is it, exactly, that he wants to prove? That he can, again, make his case to be considered one of the top goaltenders in the world? Sure, he's a little older, maybe even starting to sprout some greys, but it wasn't that long ago, not really, that we at The Hockey News proclaimed Gibson the “NHL's new best goalie.”

When the aforementioned January 2019 issue hit shelves, the case was fairly straightforward. From the beginning of Gibson's

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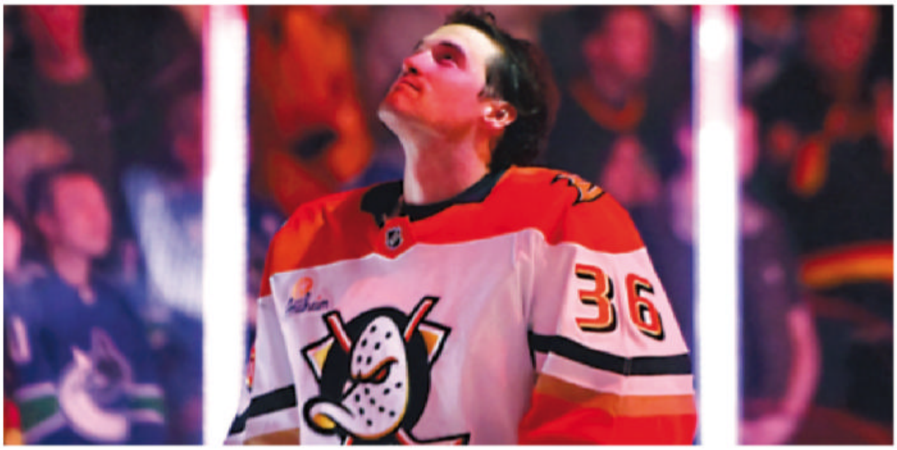
> “It’s tough being in one place for so long, and **you’ve got to say bye to a lot of close friendships**
>
> **– JOHN GIBSON**

rookie season in 2015-16 on through to the end of the 2018-19 campaign, scant few netminders’ numbers could match those of Gibson. Across 210 games, he’d posted a .922 save percentage, 2.42 goals-against average and 16 shutouts. Among the 65 goaltenders who had played at least 50 games over the same span, those were good for the third-, seventh- and eighth-best ranks in the NHL, respectively.

But even more than that, Gibson was carrying his team in a way no other big-league goaltender was. Though there are slight variations from model to model, most advanced-stat aggregators show Gibson as one of the NHL’s elite stoppers during that four-season stretch. That is particularly so when sorting by goals saved above expected – a measure of goals a netminder prevents as compared to the expected performance of a league-average goalie facing similar-quality shots. How good was Gibson? Advanced-stat site evolving-hockey.com had Gibson posting 91.5 goals saved above expected at all strengths from 2015-16 through 2018-19. The next-best goaltender, Sergei Bobrovsky, came in at 56.2.

But as the Ducks’ fortunes took a turn, so did Gibson’s stock. As noted, he hasn’t seen playoff action since 2018. He hasn’t won a playoff game since the campaign prior. And many of the same metrics that once made him appear outstanding have since made him look woefully average or, frankly, worse. To wit, since the start of 2019-20, Gibson ranks 115th out of 165 netminders with a minus-7.8 goals saved above expected.



FOWL PLAY
Advanced stats show Gibson was one of the NHL’s top goalies between 2015 and ’19.

TOP: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: SIMON FEARN-IMAGN IMAGES

However, it is because Gibson’s statistical downturn coincided with Anaheim’s descent – and not in spite of it – that there remains a belief his best years aren’t behind him. The way Red Wings GM Steve Yzerman sees it, Gibson’s performance over the past several seasons is less a reflection of his ability than it is the realities of playing behind a rebuilding club. “We’re sitting here today banking that John has battled through, that he’s going to be able to maintain a high level.” Yzerman told reporters. “And we like to think that we’re a reasonably solid team that’s moving forward and that he’ll be fine in this role.”

Perhaps that is what most bodes well for Gibson in his quest to reassert himself: he’s not coming in to backstop another rebuilding squad. Detroit was right in the wild-card race until the bitter end last season.

More importantly as it pertains to Gibson, there appears to be a renewed commitment to defending. In the back half of the season, under coach Todd McLellan, the Red Wings were one of the league’s better defensive outfits. Gibson played behind the McLellan-coached Team North America at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, too, and he’s more than familiar with assistant coach Trent Yawney. In fact, it could be the rekindling of that particular relationship that inspires the most confidence that a return to prior form is possible. “I grew up with him,” Gibson said. “He was my first coach in (AHL) Norfolk, and then I had him for quite a few years in Anaheim. Having some familiar faces with Trent Yawney and Todd definitely helps ease the transition.”

That transition, though, will take time. Yes, there are the logistical challenges – moving houses, getting the kids settled and learning the ins and outs of a new city – but there is also the emotional weight of it all. For so long, Gibson has been synonymous with the Ducks. He doesn’t know what big-league life looks like outside of Anaheim.

But the new challenge comes with a certain thrill. In Detroit, Gibson believes he can pursue the post-season again. He has the opportunity to be part of an Original Six franchise. And, as he said time and again, he gets the chance to prove that the Gibson of old is still in there. What could be better than that? “It’s just a really exciting time,” he said. “I’m really privileged and honored to be coming in and be a part of it all.” H

HEAD COACH
GLEN GULUTZAN

TEAM
DALLAS STARS

DIVISION
CENTRAL

STARS ALIGN

For the past 12 years, Glen Gulutzan has been on a secret mission – one so covert, even he didn't know about it. But now back in 'Big D,' he is on a mission to be the one to finally get the Stars over the top

BY CAROL SCHRAM

FOR NEARLY A YEAR, Gulutzan has been making plans to make a return to Texas.

Grace Gulutzan, that is. The teenager is a first-year softball pitcher and utility player who will be taking her talents to Hill College, about an hour south of Dallas. It's a bit of a homecoming. Grace spent four pre-school years in the Lone Star State while her father, Glen Gulutzan, was coaching the AHL's Texas Stars and then the NHL's Dallas Stars. "She went to kindergarten in Dallas, so she didn't remember much about it," Glen said. "But she's excited to go and play softball."

Months after Grace's commitment, another spin of the NHL's coaching carousel will have parents Glen and Nicole landing close at hand. One day after the Boston Bruins filled the last of this spring's eight other off-season coaching vacancies in early June, three-time reigning GM of the Year Jim Nill made the difficult decision to open another. Nill fired then-coach Peter DeBoer June 6, despite the Stars coming off a 106-point season and their third trip to the Western Conference final in as many years.

When the announcement came down, Gulutzan was a bit too preoccupied to give the opening a second thought. At the time, he was busy running the vaunted Edmonton Oilers power play as one of Kris Knoblauch's assistants behind the bench. But once the Florida Panthers eliminated the Oilers June 17, the interview process unfolded at warp speed. "I'm calling him and getting permission from Edmonton to interview him, and I need to get him down ASAP," Nill said. "He agrees to come down, and we had an interview."

Two weeks later, Gulutzan was being introduced to the media as Dallas' new coach, in the same market where he'd started his NHL coaching career 14 years earlier.

Gulutzan, 54, was born in The Pas, Man., and grew up in Hudson Bay, Sask. He's now tasked with getting the perennially contending Stars to take that final step. "For a guy that was devastated after you lose (the Stanley Cup), I was so impressed with how he conducted himself and how he spoke about situations," Nill said. "Character matters with your team and, most importantly, your head coach. Your head coach is your leader. I look at Glen, and, ultimately, what brought me back to him was his leadership and his ability to have a team-first mentality. You win and lose as a team."

25/10/07

DEPARTING
EDMONTON, AB

DESTINATION
DALLAS, TX

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HEAD COACH

GLEN GULUTZAN

TEAM
DALLAS STARS

DIVISION
CENTRAL

ROUND-TRIP FLIGHT
Gulutzan returns to where he began his NHL coaching career in 2011. But Dallas is radically different now.

Today's Stars are one of the NHL's model franchises, and they are built to win now. That was decidedly not the case during Gulutzan's first go around in Texas. When he was hired to coach the organization's brand-new AHL club in Austin in 2009, a bumpy transition was underway from then-owner Tom Hicks to current steward Tom Gaglardi.

But when opportunity knocked after six years at the helm of the ECHL's Las Vegas Wranglers, a then-38-year-old Gulutzan made the leap. He and Nicole – along with the couple's four young children – moved to the Austin suburb of Cedar Park. "It was a very exciting time in my life because I was coming from the ECHL," Gulutzan said.

Both Gulutzan and the Stars have come close to the Cup in recent years, but Lord Stanley still eludes them.

The Texas Stars aimed to enhance hockey's footprint in the state after the organization's affiliation in Iowa fizzled out. And the Austin startups were an instant success. In his first season, Gulutzan took the new fan base on a ride all the way to the Calder Cup final. During that post-season, the team was led by a 20-year-old Jamie Benn, who had been assigned to the AHL after a 22-goal NHL rookie campaign in Dallas. Benn then led Texas with 26 points in 24 playoff games.

> “For a guy that was devastated after you lose (the Stanley Cup), **I was so impressed with how he conducted himself** – **STARS GM JIM NILL**

This fall, Gulutzan will reunite with Benn as the latter returns to Dallas for his 17th season – and his 13th as captain. After logging 49 points in 2024-25, the 36-year-old Benn needs another 44 to join Mike Modano as the only other player in franchise history to reach 1,000 points. "I've kept in touch with Jamie over the years," Gulutzan said. "That relationship has maintained because I certainly respect Jamie and everything he's done. I loved him as a player."

Benn and Gulutzan got within two games of the Calder Cup in 2010. And while each has also now reached the Stanley Cup final during their respective NHL career, neither has won it all. "For me, the biggest thing with Jamie, going right back to Austin, is 'Let's finish this thing off,' " Gulutzan said.

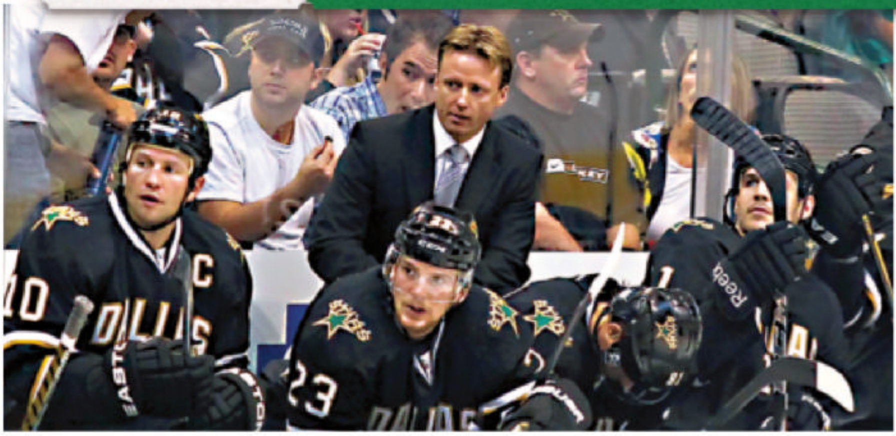
Gulutzan spent two seasons in Austin before the Stars promoted him to the NHL bench, where he spent two more working with Benn and one of the league's lowest-paid rosters. Gulutzan's Stars put up a record of 64-57-9, with the 2012-13 owners' lockout limiting his second year behind the bench to just 48 games.

Once Gaglardi was comfortably settled into his owner's chair in the spring of 2013, he lured Nill and his four Stanley Cup rings away from Ken Holland's management group in Detroit. Nill elected to start fresh with his own veteran coach, Lindy Ruff, triggering an odyssey for Gulutzan that would see him work with some of the most storied names in the coaching fraternity. "Twelve years ago, Jim actually sent me on a reconnaissance mission," Gulutzan joked at his opening presser. "That was up through Western Canada – Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton. He didn't tell me until about a week ago that he was bringing me back, and the mission was over."

First stop: three seasons with the Canucks. Running the penalty kill, Gulutzan assisted John Tortorella and worked with fellow assistant Mike Sullivan for a year, then spent two seasons under his own former assistant coach from the Stars, Willie Desjardins. "When I got let go in Dallas, the chance to work for a veteran coach was very appealing," he said. "It was a real good

TOP: RON CHENOY-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: BRUCE FEDYCK-IMAGN IMAGES

learning experience for me to be with John and to see a veteran guy who had won a Stanley Cup. And, obviously, Mike Sullivan was there as well – two Cups himself. That year was a real growth year for me.”



Tortorella lasted just one season in Vancouver, and Sullivan left with him. But when new team president Trevor Linden tapped Desjardins as his first coaching hire, Gulutzan was kept on by his former colleague.

In 2016, the Calgary Flames came knocking with another head job. But again, the environment was challenging. In a period of transition, the Flames had missed the playoffs in six of the previous seven seasons. In Bob Hartley’s final year, they sank to 77 points.

> “Twelve years ago, Jim actually sent me on a reconnaissance mission. **He didn’t tell me until about a week ago** – **GLEN GULUTZAN**

When Gulutzan arrived, a strong, young nucleus was forming around Johnny Gaudreau, Sean Monahan, Rasmus Andersson and freshly minted sixth-overall pick Matthew Tkachuk. That group returned to the post-season in 2017, but a miss one year later spelled the end of the road for Gulutzan again. He left Calgary with a record of 82-68-14.

Next stop, Edmonton. Todd McLellan brought Gulutzan in to help improve a power play that was coming off a last-place finish (14.8 percent) in 2017-18 despite having heavy hitters Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. By November, the Oilers fired McLellan and replaced him with Ken Hitchcock. After that, Dave Tippett, Jay Woodcroft and Kris Knoblauch were, in turn, each handed the keys to Oil Country. But even though most bench bosses are eager to bring in their own people when they start a new job, Gulutzan stayed on through those four regime changes, watching each new hire put their unique stamp on the Oilers as he continued to finesse the team’s superstars into one of the league’s most consistently lethal power-play units.

Gulutzan’s success came from teaching his players how to combine X’s and O’s with natural impulses. It’s a coaching style he plans to replicate in Dallas. “The biggest thing for me is putting together a system to make the players the most instinctual they can be,” he said. “When they’re playing on instinct, playing a little bit of road hockey, that’s when you get the best performance.”

TOP: KEVIN JAIRAJ-IMAGN IMAGES; BOTTOM: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

While many new coaches look to turn around underperforming rosters, Gulutzan is now taking over a Stars squad full of thoroughbreds, including Jake Oettinger in net, Miro Heiskanen and rising star Thomas Harley on the blueline and a high-IQ forward group made up of savvy vets like Benn, Matt Duchene and Mikko Rantanen and a younger wave led by Wyatt Johnston.

Gulutzan doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel. And in a league where parity predominates even while the Panthers reign as today’s big cats, he’s happy to leave the ‘Cup or Bust’ mantra back in Edmonton. After getting a first-hand look at Florida’s bruising style in the past two Cup finals, Gulutzan believes the Stars’ best path to success isn’t a copycat approach. “I don’t think every team can play that way,” he said. “And I don’t know if that style would suit us the best.”

Still, every winner serves up takeaways that can be applied. “If we’re going to make the next step, I’d love to use that hockey IQ we have,” Gulutzan said. “But I also know there’s one degree of heavier-grinding, finishing-your-check, holding-onto-the-puck hockey that needs to come into play. Because every round ramps up a bit. I think you have to build that into 82 games. You can’t just turn it on at the end.” H

NHL

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CAROLINA HURRICANES

CHANGING SPEED

K'Andre Miller is looking forward to fitting in with the Hurricanes' high-pace philosophy and enjoying the more laid-back lifestyle Carolina has to offer **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

THERE'S A FUN LITTLE paradox to K'Andre Miller's move from the New York Rangers to the Carolina Hurricanes.

On one level, the big defenseman is going from The City That Never Sleeps – and the hyper-bustling borough of Manhattan – to the take-your-time, low-and-slow South. But on another level, he's joining a Hurricanes team known for playing the game at such a high pace that it leaves most other teams strewn in their wake.

On both fronts, Miller is happy with his new home and team. "We always had great battles when I was on the other side in New York," he said. "They have such a fast team and get up and down the ice in a fast motion. They do everything as a team. It's a fun group to watch, and they've had a lot of success recently, so I'm excited."

Miller also joked that he's happy he no longer has to worry about getting hemmed in his own zone when playing against the Canes – he'll now be a part of the relentless attack that has made Carolina one of the Eastern Conference's best squads.

Now, the Hurricanes have yet to break through to another Stanley Cup final, but an effective summer by GM Eric Tulsky has Carolina once again threatening to make a run for the franchise's second championship. Along with Miller on defense, Tulsky also brought in one of the top forwards available this summer when he inked erstwhile Winnipeg Jets left winger Nikolaj Ehlers to a six-year contract.

> WE ALWAYS HAD GREAT BATTLES WHEN **I WAS ON THE OTHER SIDE IN NEW YORK**
>
> – K'Andre Miller

In Miller, Tulsky sees a player who will slot right in with what Carolina wants to do on the ice. "We think he's a great fit for us," Tulsky said. "He's a really powerful skater who can close out effectively and take away time and space. The aggressive way we play will suit him very well. He's also very strong in front of the net, which is also helpful and important. His skating and recovery speed will be effective for us. When we want guys to get up the ice, they need to be able to get back, too."

Miller came to Carolina via trade on July 1, with Tulsky sending prospect defenseman Scott Morrow, a 2026 second-round pick and a conditional first-round pick in either '26 or '27 to the Rangers. Miller, an RFA, then signed an eight-year, $60-million ($7.5-million AAV) deal with Carolina. Tulsky said talks between the two teams had gone on for a while. And

CALM IN CAROLINA
Miller, who grew up in Minnesota, is looking forward to the similar pace that Raleigh has to offer.

> I LOVED MY TIME IN NEW YORK, **BUT I'M EXCITED FOR WHAT'S TO COME IN CAROLINA** – K'Andre Miller

based on all the rumblings that had surrounded the Rangers throughout the season, that's not surprising. Before Miller, New York traded away Kaapo Kakko, who the team had selected second overall back in 2019, and Rangers lifer Chris Kreider. "There was a lot of noise throughout the season," Miller said. "It was definitely in the back of my head that something could happen. I loved my time in New York, but I'm excited for what's to come in Carolina."

And while Raleigh is hardly a backwater – that area of North Carolina is part of 'The Triangle,' a research-and-tech hub that has grown leaps and bounds in the past 20 years – there will be cultural differences from New York City, one of the most famous metropolises in the world. And that's just fine with Miller. "I'm super excited for that aspect," he said. "The style of living being a bit of a slower pace, I'm really going to like that. Being from Minnesota, I think it will be comparable."

The biscuits and barbecue will certainly be better down there, even if the bagel quality takes a step back. But truly, Miller is there for the hockey. Playing for coach Rod Brind'Amour is another plus when it comes to the Hurricanes. "I've heard nothing but great things about Rod," Miller said. "I can't wait to get to know him and talk hockey. A number of guys reached out to me and said, 'You're really lucky to be in this position to have that coach and a team like Carolina supporting you.' So, I'm super excited for the whole thing."

Playing for Carolina isn't for everyone. Famously, Mikko Rantanen lasted only 13 games with the Canes, and the team does play a very specific, structured system that requires maximum buy-in. But the payoff is obvious. Since Brind'Amour took over, Carolina has been a beast, reaching the conference final three times in his seven seasons as coach.

The problem recently has been pushing through to that Stanley Cup final. Carolina's offense has dried up completely at the worst possible times in the post-season, and while it's no shame to get shut down by the Florida Panthers, at some point, you need to score goals against good teams. Miller's ability to make plays through the neutral zone and get pucks up to forwards will help that cause. And, at 25, he's just starting to hit his prime as an NHL blueliner. Let's not forget, the player he's essentially replacing on Carolina's back end is Brent Burns, who turned 40 last season.

However, still starring on the Hurricanes' blueline is Jaccob Slavin, a two-time Lady Byng Trophy winner and a player who will serve as a potential partner and certainly a mentor. "He's definitely one of the guys I've tried to model my game after the past couple of years," Miller said. "He's obviously a generational player on this team, and it's going to be great sharing ideas and sharing the ice with him."

So, it's a remix of a lineup for the Canes heading into 2025-26, but it's also one of the strongest units the franchise has put together in recent years. Is it enough to finally break through in the Eastern Conference? Slow and steady wins the race – even if Miller and Carolina will play fast in order to do so.

TOP: SERGEI BELSKI-USA TODAY SPORTS; MIDDLE: DANNY WILD-IMAGN IMAGES

COMPETITIVE SPIRIT BURNS
Even going into Year 22 in the NHL, Burns has as much motivation as ever to hunt down his first Stanley Cup.

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

COLORADO AVALANCHE

AVS AND HAVE NOTS

Brent Burns has had an incredible career spanning two decades. But he's still chasing his first Stanley Cup. That's what made signing in Colorado so attractive to him **BY MICHAEL TRAIKOS**

AS ONE OF THE NHL's oldest active players, Brent Burns has yet to decide if this season – his 22nd in the league – will be his last.

Much will depend on how the season goes. Or, more importantly, how it ends. "There's a lot of different reasons," Burns said of why he's still playing. "Obviously, the biggest one for me is there's still something to chase. I'm still super motivated for that. There's one big goal still."

That big goal, of course, is to win the Stanley Cup. Burns came close with San Jose in 2016, when the Sharks lost in the Cup final to the Pittsburgh Penguins. But for more than two decades spent at hockey's highest level, it has eluded him.

For Burns, who turned 40 in March, time is running out. He needs to win a championship. And he needs to win it soon, lest he join the list of Best Players Who Never Won A Stanley Cup. That helps explain why Burns was so strategic in deciding where to sign as a UFA this summer. Like Corey Perry, who has a knack for picking teams on their way to a final, Burns surveyed the landscape to predict where he had the best chance of achieving his goal.

In the end, he chose Colorado because he felt the Avalanche represented the best chance of helping him win a league title. "I'm really looking forward to being a part of a special group," Burns said. "Hockey is a pretty small world. I've played with 'Mac' (Nathan MacKinnon) before. I've come across Brock (Nelson) a little bit. We have some mutual friends from Minnesota. And, obviously, I know (Martin) Necas and Jack (Drury). There are a couple of other relationships there.

"I know their team in how they attack the game and how they are at the rink. You always hear how dedicated they are. I'm coming from a place that's similar in that way."

Leaving Carolina, where he spent the past three seasons, was not an easy decision. Burns loved his time there, whether it was playing for coach Rod Brind'Amour ("It's been no secret how special I think 'Roddy' is," he said) or playing alongside blueliner Jaccob Slavin ("I was super lucky to play with a guy who is so elite," he said).

Still, the prospect of joining a deep defense led by Team Canada members Devon Toews and two-time Norris Trophy winner Cale Makar was too good to pass up. "He's obviously just insanely talented," Burns said of Makar. "The things he can do, there's not many – if any – people in the world who can do it. I'm really excited to see it in person every day and see how he ticks and how he thinks about the game."

> THERE'S STILL SOMETHING TO CHASE. **I'M STILL SUPER MOTIVATED FOR THAT. THERE'S ONE BIG GOAL STILL** – Brent Burns on playing a 22nd NHL season

In Burns, the Avalanche are also getting another Norris Trophy winner. In fact, this is the first time two Norris Trophy winners are playing on the same team since Burns and Erik Karlsson were teammates in San Jose. Not that Burns, who had 29 points last season, expects to challenge for that award again. “I’m 40 years old, but I can still learn a lot,” he said. “I feel like every year, it’s a little different. That’s part of it. That’s part of the fun. You play with different people, and you’re always adapting on and off the ice. It’s part of what I enjoy, just trying to figure that stuff out and get better and keep playing.”

BRENT BURNS

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

> I’M 40, BUT I CAN STILL LEARN A LOT. IT’S PART OF WHAT I ENJOY, JUST **TRYING TO FIGURE THAT STUFF OUT AND GET BETTER** – Brent Burns

Burns might not be the same offensive defenseman who scored 29 goals and 76 points in his 2016-17 Norris Trophy campaign, but the Avalanche don’t need him to be. Yes, Burns is heading to Colorado to provide secondary offense. But more importantly, he’ll deliver the special brand of energy and levity that only the bearded, gap-toothed Burns can bring to a dressing room. It also helps that the last time he missed a game was Nov. 17, 2013. “I think there’s a ‘juice’ component to what he brings,” said Avalanche GM Chris MacFarland. “When July 1 hit, Brent is that special type of guy that you check in on…It just made sense.”

Whether this signing ends up being a perfect fit will depend on how deep the Avalanche can go in the playoffs. In the time since Colorado won the Stanley Cup in 2022, the team has won only one playoff round. That’s something Burns hopes to change as he embarks on what could be his final pro season. “That’s a big part of it for me,” Burns said of winning a championship. “That’s something I really want to do. It’s definitely not easy. I think it’s a special group here. Whatever they ask of me, that’s all I want to do. That’s all I’m looking at.” H

NHL WESTERN CONFERENCE

CENTRAL DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

BY JARED CLINTON

The Blackhawks’ new blood provided a glimmer of hope late last season, but Chicago entered the summer looking to add some veteran presence. That’s why **ANDRE BURAKOVSKY** was brought in. The 30-year-old comes aboard to provide stability to the middle six, though the outlook in the Windy City is such that it’s not out of the question Burakovsky sees time alongside Connor Bedard. That could help Burakovsky rediscover his offensive form. He has just 17 goals and 53 points in his past 128 games.

Cost-conscious additions were a necessity for Colorado, and **DANIL GUSHCHIN** fits the bill. The 23-year-old has boom-or-bust potential, too. The Sharks’ 2020 third-round selection had cups of coffee in San Jose, but his ice time was limited to scraps. It’s clear, however, there’s offense for the Avalanche to unlock. Only 17 players have posted more points in the AHL than Gushchin over the past three seasons. There are concerns about size – he’s 5-foot-8 and 165 pounds– but he plays bigger than his frame.

What’s old is new again in Dallas. After one season in St. Louis – and almost a year to the day he was dealt to the Blues – **RADEK FAKSA**, 31, returned to the Stars as a free agent with a smaller price tag. Though there was a time Faksa looked primed to become a dynamic two-way pivot, there are no more illusions about what he brings to the lineup: solid fourth-line minutes and penalty-killing ability. The top-heavy Stars needed players to do the grunt work, and Faksa is more than capable.

Almost everywhere he’s been since his time in St. Louis, **VLADIMIR TARASENKO** has felt like a square peg in a round hole. That was especially true last season with Detroit. But Minnesota presents an exciting opportunity for Tarasenko to play middle-six minutes and alongside one of Kirill Kaprizov or Matt Boldy. Likewise, the chance to be a fixture on the second PP unit could rejuvenate the 33-year-old. No one is expecting another 30-goal campaign. But 20-plus is possible, even probable, in the right circumstances.

After last season’s splashy summer, Nashville took a more measured approach to off-season additions this time around. That included landing blueliner **NICOLAS HAGUE** from the Golden Knights, leveraging Vegas’ cap situation to pry the 26-year-old rearguard out of Sin City. Not only can Hague bolster a blueline that needs help, but he can also play on either side throughout the lineup. Hague’s physical presence, instincts with the puck and ability to soak up minutes will be useful if Roman Josi needs time on the shelf.

Name it and **PIUS SUTER** did it last season for the Vancouver Canucks. In some ways, that’s nothing new – he’s been a utility forward capable of playing in all situations since his NHL arrival – but Suter, 29, had a minor breakout after being thrust into the biggest minutes of his career. Now in St. Louis, can he exceed his 25-goal, 46-point output? Likely not, particularly as the prime minutes will be hard to come by, but he significantly elevates the middle of the Blues’ lineup.

There’s a reason why **BRANDON TANEV** becomes a fan favorite wherever he plays. Not once has the 33-year-old taken a shift off, and he’ll do all the small things that coaches and hometown fans love. Need a big shot block? Tanev will make it. Want energy from a crash-and-bang forecheck? Tanev will bring it. And looking for an injection of offense on the fourth line? Tanev can provide it. He’ll be a sparkplug for the Mammoth as Utah looks to beef up in order to push for a playoff spot.

The Jets aren’t kidding themselves into believing **GUSTAV NYQUIST** will match his career-high 75-point output from two seasons back. However, Winnipeg is hoping his 28-point performance last season was an outlier. Now 36, Nyquist has lost some of the speed that once made him such a handful, but he can rely on his playmaking and veteran savvy to be a steady middle-six contributor. Add to it his usefulness on the penalty kill, and he’ll be an important cog in Winnipeg no matter his point total.

WORM WELCOME
Perry hasn't exactly endeared himself to the L.A. faithful over the years, but he hopes to win them over eventually.

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

> I HAVE HAD MANY BATTLES WITH L.A., AND THE FANS ARE PASSIONATE. **NOW, I'VE GOT TO GET THEM ON MY SIDE**
>
> – Corey Perry

LOS ANGELES KINGS

CHANGING LANES

Whether it's navigating an NHL net-front or SoCal streets, Perry is plenty used to handling congestion. But donning a Kings crest? That will take some getting used to **BY DOUG WARD**

COREY PERRY DOES HIS best work in traffic.

Like any Californian, – by birth or transplant – Perry knows how to navigate the unexpected twists and turns along the congested freeways and surface streets that connect suburban Anaheim to downtown Los Angeles. The 57, to the 91, to the 5, to the 10, off on Pico, left on Figueroa.

However, Perry's arrival at Crypto.com Arena was not met with the sort of press conference pomp and circumstance befitting a star with ties to Southern California. Instead, the thought of Perry at home in the Kings' house prompted a more dismayed response, the kind you get from Fred Armisen's Stuart on *SNL*'s long-running "The Californians" sketch.

"What're you doin' here?"

This is no laughing matter to real Californians. Not to Kings fans – nor Ducks fans, for that matter. "It is what it is," Perry said at an introductory conference call, resorting to a cliché in a career that is wholly original.

Perry, 40, has never shied away from conflict and has never been worried about showing up uninvited or unwelcome. Playing from the heart, in the heart of a city known for perpetual congestion, makes perfect sense. The surroundings are so familiar they are practically Perry's natural habitat.

Between Anaheim and Los Angeles, Perry saw his career take him outside the SoCal bubble – with stops in Dallas, Montreal, Tampa Bay, Chicago and Edmonton – before boomeranging back. But it was Perry's time in a Ducks uniform that left a mark. Despised in Los Angeles, he's revered in Anaheim.

Perry gets around, but he does not travel light, carrying plenty of baggage and a reputation that precedes him. There's a Stanley Cup, a Hart Trophy and a Rocket Richard Trophy. Perry also carries a colorful nickname, 'The Worm,' earned by forever playing on the edge, all the way to six Cup finals.

All these years later, Perry still loves hockey, California and going to the rink every morning. Whether he is loved in return is a matter of perspective. Perry never imagined he would one day be a King, but here we are. "I didn't know where my career was going to go and how it would play out," Perry said. "But I am excited. I look forward to the challenge."

But is Perry a dirty player, or is he a player willing to do the dirty work? "It's pretty simple," Perry said of his play style. "It's hard. Go in the dirty areas. Be in front the net. Control the puck from the faceoff circles on down. That's my type of game. It has been who I am from the time I came in the league. That can't change."

Nothing much changes with Perry but the sweater. He antagonized Los Angeles for years in a Ducks uniform. So, what will it feel like for Perry to all of a sudden pull on a jersey with a Kings crest? "It's going to be a change and a little bit different," Perry said. "But when you look back at the teams I have played for, in Dallas, Chicago and Edmonton, we had rivalries with Anaheim."

Perry won't go quietly into that good hockey night. There are more games to impact, more enemies to convert and more Cup finals to reach. It's nothing personal, just hockey. "Anaheim was home for 14 years, and we made friends," Perry said. "My wife is still in contact with people back there. It's kind of coming home. Back to California. We're excited as a family."

Fans in Southern California aren't sure how to feel about the whole thing. Complicit? Betrayed? Confused? Perry has a few words of wisdom for folks in Anaheim who might be having trouble working through things. "This will be my seventh year gone (from Anaheim)," he said. "I don't really know anybody there anymore. On the team, it's totally changed since I've been there. But I hope the Ducks fans can realize I love the game, and I want to win."

Perry was brought to L.A. by incoming Kings GM Ken Holland, the same man who was responsible for bringing him to Edmonton back in January of 2024. Perry believes he can help the Kings "get over the hump" in the playoffs.

There are no surprises with Perry. His game is as reliably annoying as traffic on the 405 on the way to LAX. You know it's coming, but it's still maddening. "Being in the league 20 years, everybody knows my game by now," Perry said.

Perry's hijinks have made life miserable for Kings fans seemingly forever. Will those fans embrace Perry now that he is doing it *for* them, rather than against them? "I have had many battles with L.A., and the fans are passionate," Perry said. "It's exciting when you see that. Now, I've got to get them on my side."

Exactly how does Perry plan on doing that? "I'm just going to let my play speak," he said, "and go from there."

Let the games begin. H

COREY
PERRY

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

> BEING IN THE LEAGUE 20 YEARS, **EVERYBODY KNOWS MY GAME BY NOW** – Corey Perry

PACIFIC DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

BY BRIAN COSTELLO

MIKAEL GRANLUND will be playing for his fifth team in four seasons when he dons an Anaheim jersey for the first time Oct. 9. But his nomadic days appear to be over for a while, as the 33-year-old signed a three-year deal at a $7-million AAV in the summer. The Ducks have high hopes Granlund can be the playmaking winger to bring out the goal-scoring best in either center Leo Carlsson or Mason McTavish. Granlund had 66 points last year and had previously topped 60 with Minnesota (twice), Nashville and San Jose.

IVAN PROSVETOV has long had the height to be an NHL goalie. And now, he has the stats to back it up. A former top prospect in the Arizona Coyotes system, Prosvetov, 26, is making a return to North America after an impressive season in the KHL with CSKA Moscow – 20 wins and a .920 save percentage. The 6-foot-5 stopper played parts of four seasons in the NHL (24 games total) with Arizona and Colorado, but he had a sub-.900 SP during each stint. He'll battle Devin Cooley for the backup job behind Dustin Wolf.

During his best season in the NHL, **ANDREW MANGIAPANE** scored 35 goals and provided a second wave of offense for a Calgary Flames team that won 50 games in 2021-22. But in the three seasons since, Mangiapane has averaged just 15 goals and played closer to the bottom of his team's lineup. The Oilers signed Mangiapane, 29, to serve as triggerman on the receiving end of saucer passes from Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. It will be interesting to see the reception he receives in rival Calgary.

Kings GM Ken Holland knew exactly where to turn when he went looking for a steady, no-nonsense defenseman to strengthen the Los Angeles blueline. **CODY CECI** played under Holland for three seasons in Edmonton and was on the winning side of three consecutive first-round playoff series between the Oilers and Kings. Ceci, 31, plays the right side and will slot in behind Drew Doughty in key defensive assignments. As right-shot Brandt Clarke matures his game, Ceci can slide down to the third pairing.

The first point **JEFF SKINNER** records with the San Jose Sharks this season will be the 700th of his 16-year NHL career. While things didn't work out for Skinner in Edmonton last season – just 29 points after signing as a $3-million UFA – he rolled the dice again for an identical deal with the Sharks. Now 33, Skinner has shown to be a player who prefers being a bigger fish in a small pond rather than the reverse. Skinner is still on Buffalo's buyout payroll for another five years to the tune of $18.22 million.

A cap crunch in Dallas forced the Stars to put **MASON MARCHMENT** on the market, and the Kraken answered the call. Acquired for the remarkably low price of a pair of mid-round picks (a 2025 fourth-rounder and a 2026 third-rounder), Marchment is the type of middle-six forward Seattle needs to beef up its attack. The 30-year-old is a 6-foot-5 power forward with back-to-back 22-goal seasons. Marchment is also a UFA at season's end, giving him more incentive to shine in the Emerald City.

The Canucks believe there's still plenty of tread left on the tires of **EVANDER KANE**, and they'd rather see him use it in his hometown of Vancouver. Kane, in the final year of a four-year deal paying him $5.125 million per year, was acquired from Edmonton for a fourth-round pick when the Oilers were eager to open up cap room. At 34, Kane is better suited for the second or third line, but he still plays a feisty, abrasive style that can distract the opposition and create time and space for teammates like Elias Pettersson.

The Golden Knights have long taken pride in having a deep cast of forwards, which means they annually have arguably the best fourth line in the league. **COLTON SISSONS** is another means to that end. Sissons, 31, was a lifelong Nashville Predator and part of the return, along with Jeremy Lauzon, in the deal that sent Nicolas Hague the other way. Sissons replaces Nicolas Roy (traded to Toronto) as fourth-line center and brings with him a 53.7 percent faceoff win rate since 2013-14, 23rd in the NHL (min. 7,500 faceoffs).

DUCKS ‘FLY’ TOGETHER
Zegras will be exploring a new locale this season, but he will at least be reunited with his old roommate.

PERRY NELSON-IMAGN IMAGES

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS

CENTER STAGE

Zegras will hit the ice in a new city and for a new coach this fall. But, while nothing is set in stone, he could be doing so from his old on-ice home **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

WAS OSCAR WILDE A hockey fan? The quick-witted Irishman certainly could have been pondering the career of new Philadelphia Flyers center Trevor Zegras when he wrote, “There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.”

The quote dates back to 1890, but it neatly sums up the first five years of Zegras’ career as a professional.

Those years included some giddying highs. The NHL’s “nothing regular about the regular season” TV ad in December of 2021 featured Zegras’ cheeky over-the-net pass to set Sonny Milano up for an alley-oop goal. Zegras also finished as runner-up for the 2022 Calder Trophy and landed the cover slot alongside Sarah Nurse on EA Sports’ *NHL 23*.

But there were also some lows. On ESPN, John Tortorella – then a TV analyst and soon after the Flyers’ bench boss – ignited a debate about whether flashy plays like Zegras’ were “good for the game.” Then, a contract standoff with the Anaheim Ducks led to Zegras arriving late to 2023 training camp, and a series of injuries the next two seasons stalled his career momentum.

After replacing Dallas Eakins behind Anaheim’s bench in 2023, new coach Greg Cronin moved Zegras almost exclusively to the wing. Zegras’ ice time dipped, and so did his point totals. “From a production standpoint, it’s obviously not what I expect out of myself,” he said. “I felt like I was doing all the right things and everything that I was asked to do. I definitely learned a lot over the last two years. I guess more about myself and what I’m capable of.”

On June 23, Ducks GM Pat Verbeek dealt the 24-year-old to the Flyers for depth center Ryan Poehling and a pair of draft picks. This fall marks a fresh start for both Zegras and for the Flyers, who hired Rick Tocchet as coach in May after firing Tortorella in March.

Tocchet preaches accountability. He also has a reputation for building strong bonds with his players. That has brought out the best in varied personalities, including student-of-the-game Sidney Crosby, enigma Phil Kessel and next-gen talent Quinn Hughes.

Continuing his emphasis on the individual, Tocchet hopes to deliver the same magic in Philadelphia, including with the free-spirited Zegras. “Fun-loving kid,” Tocchet told a Philadelphia radio show in July. “I want him smiling.”

This summer, nearly every team in the league prioritized center depth. When Flyers GM Daniel Briere acquired Zegras, he made the deal with the belief the injury bug was in the rear-view mirror for the Bedford, N.Y., native. If all goes well, Briere is buying low on a top-six talent with major upside. “It’s not a secret that we’re thin in the middle,” Briere said. “Hopefully, he can help us out. But, at the end of the day, ‘Tocc’ is going to be the one making that decision.”

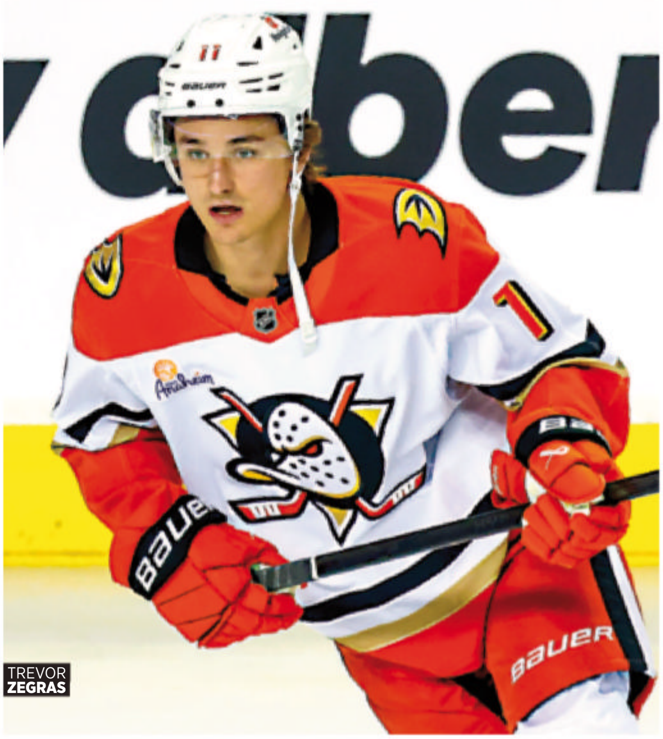
Zegras is eager to return to his preferred spot on the ice, and his stats make a compelling case. Playing center under Eakins during his first two full NHL seasons, Zegras cracked 60 points both years. But then, under Cronin, he managed just 47 points over 88 total games.

“I’ve played center my whole career, up until two seasons ago,” Zegras said. “I’ve always felt more comfortable there. It was good to play the wing and learn that position and responsibilities. We’ll see where it goes with the new coach and the new team, but it would definitely be exciting to be back in the middle."

During Zegras' time in Anaheim, the Ducks were a young team. In Philadelphia, he'll be supported at his position by a pair of quality vets. Captain Sean Couturier won the Selke Trophy in 2020, while incoming UFA acquisition Christian Dvorak has the two-way chops Tocchet understands and values. Dvorak and Tocchet also spent four seasons together with the Arizona Coyotes.

USA Hockey's National Team Development Program. The pair won gold together at the 2021 world juniors, with York as captain and Zegras as tournament MVP. Meanwhile, Jamie Drysdale, selected sixth overall in 2020, was Zegras' running mate in Orange County before being sent to Philadelphia for Cutter Gauthier early in 2024.

"I lived with Jamie for two years at Anaheim and spent a lot of time with him," Zegras said. "It's exciting when you have a familiar face like that in a new home."


TREVOR ZEGRAS

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

> FROM A PRODUCTION STANDPOINT, IT'S NOT WHAT I EXPECT OUT OF MYSELF. **I FELT LIKE I WAS DOING ALL THE RIGHT THINGS** – Trevor Zegras

Opportunity is not the only thing that makes Philadelphia a desirable fit for Zegras. The 2019 draft's No. 9 pick is now closer to family and friends on the East Coast and will reunite with two D-men he knows well.

Cam York, drafted five spots behind him, was a teammate at

With the Flyers looking to vault their way up the standings after five consecutive years without a post-season appearance, Zegras has a golden opportunity to get hockey people talking once again. "This, hopefully, is just one piece of the puzzle," Briere said.

METRO DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

BY RYAN KENNEDY

The Canes have landed some big names via trade recently, but they couldn't retain Jake Guentzel or Mikko Rantanen. **NIKOLAJ EHLERS**, on the other hand, signed as the big free agent and was more than happy to hitch his wagon to Carolina for six years. Coming from another systems team in Winnipeg, Ehlers, 29, has a better chance of fitting in than those who came before him, and if the talented left winger can help push Carolina to the final, he'll never have to pay for a pulled-pork sandwich in Raleigh.

With **CHARLIE COYLE** joining a healthy Sean Monahan and an ascendant Adam Fantilli, the Blue Jackets enter the season with their best collection of centers in franchise history. It's a low bar, but still, Coyle, 33, is a perfect third-line pivot who can play higher in the lineup if need be. With his size and two-way game, he's a valuable piece for a team that overachieved last season and hopes to do even better this year. While he had a rough post-season with Colorado, he still has plenty of playoff experience.

When healthy, the Devils do not have a problem with high-end scoring. But if New Jersey wants to make a deep run in the playoffs, depth will be key, and the signing of **CONNOR BROWN** helps in that department. Brown, 31, has been to the past two Cup finals with Edmonton, and he was particularly effective in the first one, where his rabid forechecking and shorthanded prowess caused havoc against Florida. He took a step back this past post-season, but his experience will help the bottom six in New Jersey.

After years of struggle in Montreal, **JONATHAN DROUIN** resurrected his career in Colorado with the help of former junior teammate Nathan MacKinnon. Now, Drouin embarks on his next chapter sans 'Nate Dogg,' and the Isles are hoping the left winger can bring offensive punch to a team that finished tied for 27th in scoring last season. With Brock Nelson dealt at the deadline and Noah Dobson traded at the draft, New York will be in even worse shape unless players can step up, and Drouin, 30, is an obvious candidate.

Last season was a nightmare for the Rangers, who went from a Cup contender to a non-playoff team in the span of one memo. But the bones of a great team are still there, and with the addition of shutdown defenseman **VLADISLAV GAVRIKOV**, New York may have gotten a 2-for-1 deal. To wit: Adam Fox is coming off his worst year since before he won the Norris in 2021, but Gavrikov could be a perfect partner. The 29-year-old is a big, left-hand shot who would allow the slight righty to work his magic with a safety net.

Simply put, the Flyers had the worst goaltending crew in the NHL last season, and the stats back it up. Philly couldn't land a bona fide No. 1 in the summer, but in **DAN VLADAR**, they at least have someone with size and experience who has taken on tough roles before. Vladar, 28, backed up Dustin Wolf in Calgary, helping the rookie en route to a Calder nomination. In Philadelphia, he could do the same for the likes of Ivan Fedotov and Samuel Ersson, both of whom have less NHL experience than Vladar.

In terms of rivalries, **ALEXANDER ALEXEYEV** chose a pretty interesting place to get his career back on track. The former Washington Capitals blueliner is now giving it a go in Pittsburgh, where he'll switch captains from Alex Ovechkin to Sidney Crosby. Alexeyev, 25, has a big frame and put up decent stats in junior, but it hasn't translated at the pro level. He was the odd-man out for most of the season in Washington, so the 2018 first-rounder has all the motivation in the world to earn regular ice time with the Penguins.

The Caps were one of the most pleasant surprises in the league last year, and a top-10 defense was part of the equation. None of the regulars left over the summer, so you're looking at the same sturdy bunch leading the way back there. In terms of depth, however, **DECLAN CHISHOLM** comes in from Minnesota, where the 25-year-old established himself as an NHL regular for the first time in his pro career. He did see a little bit of power-play time with the Wild, but don't expect a ton of offense overall.

BIG BAD BRUINS
Jeannot can help the Bruins make up for some of the physicality they have lost with recent player departures.

DAN HAMILTON-IMAGN IMAGES

BOSTON BRUINS

IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

The production hasn't always been there for Tanner Jeannot. But the Boston Bruins believe he can be a valuable member of the team on and off the ice **BY JARED CLINTON**

THE QUESTION ABOUT Tanner Jeannot was always going to come. And when Bruins GM Don Sweeney stepped to the podium to address Boston's work on the opening day of signing season, it was only minutes before the subject of Jeannot's rookie year – and his production in the time since – was broached.

Jeannot stepped into the lineup as a relative unknown for the Nashville Predators to start the 2021-22 campaign. And in a rookie class boasting names such as Lucas Raymond, Cole Caufield and Seth Jarvis, it was Jeannot who took the NHL by surprise. He led all freshmen with 24 goals and finished with 41 points. Jeannot also garnered enough support, including nine second-place votes, to finish seventh in the Calder Trophy race.

For as much as that campaign helped cement Jeannot's place in the NHL, though, it also became the lens through which his career has since been viewed. And the picture hasn't always been pretty.

As a sophomore, Jeannot slumped, scoring a mere five goals and 14 points through the first two-thirds of the season. After the Tampa Bay Lightning put together a mammoth trade package, including five draft picks, to acquire Jeannot at the trade deadline in 2022-23, he returned just eight goals and 18 points in 75 games split across two seasons. And after the Bolts shipped Jeannot off to Los Angeles last summer – recouping two picks in the deal – he mustered seven goals and 13 points. In some circles, his precipitous offensive decline, especially in the wake of what seemed to be a revelatory rookie season, was a cudgel with which to beat Jeannot.

But Sweeney isn't buying it.

That much, of course, is evidenced by the fact the Bruins inked the 28-year-old Jeannot to a five-year, $17-million contract. But Sweeney made it clear that Boston wanted Jeannot not for his past accomplishments but for his current impact. "I don't know if he's getting back to scoring (24) goals," Sweeney said to reporters. "I sure hope so. Deep down, we believe he'll bring a lot more energy to our group that we need. The physicality is there. We run through a tough division. I just think everybody gets a little taller."

It's what Sweeney called adding some "juice" to the lineup. And ask Jeannot about his game, and the tough-as-nails kid from Estevan, Sask., makes it clear he embraces the role. "I try to make other guys know I'm on the ice and make them feel uncomfortable," Jeannot said. "Maybe that makes them get rid of pucks a little bit quicker or puts their teammates in a tougher spot. That tends to create more turnovers and gets the puck into my team's hands a little bit more often."

Where Jeannot's scoring may have dried up, his willingness to throw the body has not. The list of players who have thrown more hits than Jeannot since his first full season is just five names long. Each of the three forwards ahead of Jeannot – Garnet Hathaway, Keegan Kolesar and Brady Tkachuk – has played at least 30 more games in that time. And as Sweeney sees it, that sandpaper is important in both the present moment and as the Bruins look ahead.

At present, the departures of Brad Marchand and Trent Frederic did little to help Boston in the physicality department. And as the Bruins begin to chart a path forward, Sweeney believes Jeannot can provide grit, guile and guidance to the next wave. “The younger skilled players that we plan to incorporate moving forward are going to need a little breathing room,” Sweeney said. “And Tanner is going to bring a lot of that. In the room itself, his leadership skills and how he prepares to play the game, that all just boils over into what we need to continue to improve upon.”

RYAN LOMBERG & **TANNER JEANNOT**

SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES

> I TRY TO MAKE OTHER GUYS KNOW I’M ON THE ICE **AND MAKE THEM FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE** – Tanner Jeannot

If that’s the measuring stick for Jeannot, there’s no reason to believe he can’t succeed. But if there is skepticism, Jeannot can deal with that, too.

After all, before a long-term deal with an Original Six club was even the faintest dream, Jeannot made the WHL’s Moose Jaw Warriors as an undrafted walk-on. Jeannot didn’t hear his name called in the NHL draft, either, instead playing four years in major junior before earning an entry-level deal in Nashville. Even then, Jeannot flitted in and out of the AHL lineup, saw time in the ECHL and willed his way into the NHL.

So, sure, everyone would love to be the highlight-reel scorer or all-situations star, but Jeannot isn’t buying into any narratives about his past performance. He knows who he is right now and who he’s tried to be throughout his career. He isn’t aiming to change the way others view him. He never has. Rather, it’s to ensure nothing changes about the way teams view his new club. “When they see the Bruins coming into town, they know it’s going to be a fight,” Jeannot said. “That’s how it always has been. That’s been the Bruins’ culture. And I feel like, for me as a player, I’ve always tried to embody that type of culture.” H

NHL EASTERN CONFERENCE

ATLANTIC DIVISION

MEET THE NEW GUY

BY JARED CLINTON

Gone are the days when **VIKTOR ARVIDSSON** was a buzz saw wreaking havoc as a top-six fixture for the Nashville Predators, but the 32-year-old left winger remains a consistent scorer, and the tank isn’t empty yet. At his peak, he was a perennial 20-goal threat – and two-time 30-goal scorer – but he’s settling into the second chapter of his big-league career as a pesky, versatile depth piece. He’ll also be an asset on the second power-play unit in Boston. The Bruins desperately need the depth on special teams.

As painful as it was to deal JJ Peterka, given the Sabres were backed into a corner, acquiring **MICHAEL KESSELRING** makes the swap with Utah a tidy piece of business. The late-blooming Kesselring, 25, isn’t a glamorous player, and he’s not going to make highlight reels. But given Buffalo’s blueline boasts Rasmus Dahlin, Bowen Byram and Owen Power, the Sabres needed a reliable stay-at-home defender to do some dirty work. That’s Kesselring, who can be a complement to Buffalo’s roaming rearguards.

Where Michigan State alum **MASON APPLETON**, 29, fits in the Red Wings’ lineup will be determined by what Detroit needs at any given moment. Is he a top-six forward? Maybe only in a pinch, but across two stints with the Winnipeg Jets and a brief stay with the Seattle Kraken, Appleton demonstrated his positional versatility up front. Appleton’s greatest impact will come on the forecheck and when he puts his speed to use. His offense is limited, but double-digit goal and point totals are reasonable expectations.

The Cats have had good luck with former Columbus Blue Jackets keepers. That’s not to say **DANIIL TARASOV** is the next Sergei Bobrovsky – ‘Bob’ was a two-time Vezina Trophy winner by the time he headed to Florida – but Tarasov, 26, arrives with an opportunity to play behind a superior defensive outfit. And at 6-foot-5, Tarasov has raw physical tools he can shape alongside Bobrovsky. One note: if Tarasov struggles, Brandon Bussi, 27, will challenge for backup duty. He made the AHL’s all-rookie squad in 2022-23.

ZACK BOLDUC would have been on the short list of breakout candidates even before he was dealt to Montreal. The opportunity in front of him is that much greater now that he’s a Canadien, though. As a St. Louis Blue, Bolduc had his path to top-six minutes blocked, but the 22-year-old will have every opportunity to play a major role in Montreal’s attack as he looks to build on his 19-goal, 36-point rookie campaign. Plus, the snarl to the Quebec native’s game will ingratiate him to the Habs faithful.

What Senators fans will first notice about **JORDAN SPENCE** is his footwork. Much of his game is predicated on how well he moves. But the other assets the 24-year-old possesses will become clear in short order. Last season, Spence posted career-best totals, netting four goals and 28 points for the Los Angeles Kings, and his blend of skating and puck-moving ability makes him an instant upgrade to Ottawa’s second or third pairing. There’s plenty of room for Spence to grow, too. He’s a present and future asset.

It doesn’t matter where **PONTUS HOLMBERG**, 26, is asked to play, the Lightning know what they will get: good puck management, a willingness to get into the hard areas and a dash of scoring ability. His utility will be particularly important on special teams, as his hockey sense makes him a valuable penalty-killer. If that allows Tampa Bay to keep Anthony Cirelli and Brandon Hagel even the slightest bit fresher game-in and game-out – and inevitably down the stretch – Holmberg will have done his job.

Who is **MATIAS MACCELLI**? The top-six winger who registered 78 assists across his rookie and sophomore years? Or the press-box fodder who couldn’t stay in Utah’s lineup last season? What is clear is the 24-year-old needed a change of scenery, and the offensive weapons in Toronto could help rekindle Maccelli’s production. Consider this: from 2022-23 through 2023-24, among 289 forwards with 100-plus PP minutes, Maccelli ranked sixth in primary assists per 60. He could be a standout on special teams.

[OPINION]

BY SYLVAIN VÉGIARD | SYLVAIN.VEGIARD@GMAIL.COM

The 4 Nations Face-Off's point system ensured every game awarded the same number of points.

NHL

HALF AS MANY, TWICE AS GOOD

With one tweak, the NHL could get back to a pure two-point system that pushes teams to go for the win in regulation and would improve clarity in the standings

AT THE 4 NATIONS Face-Off in February, the NHL opted to use the 3-2-1-0 points system in the round-robin phase of the tournament: three points were given for a regulation win, two for an overtime or shootout (OS) win, one for an OS loss and zero for a regulation loss.

The IIHF has long used this system, as has the PWHL since its inception. The KHL used it, too, until 2017-18, when it switched to the 2-2-1-0 system that the NHL had previously introduced in 1999-00. Most North American minor-pro and junior leagues also currently use the 2-2-1-0 system.

The main advantage of the 3-2-1-0 is that it always distributes three points in every game, no matter the outcome. In contrast, the 2-2-1-0 distributes two points in each game, *except* for those that go past regulation: the OS winner still receives two points, while one point is given to the loser. Fans have long debated this now 26-year-old system, as it rewards losing teams with an extra point in OS.

Is the points system a real problem? To this question, I answer both no and yes.

No, because all teams know the current 2-2-1-0 system before the season starts, so they can manage their strategies to maximize the points they earn in the standings. The same rules apply for all, as every point is earned fairly, so no problem there.

Yes, because if fans want the standings to reflect the *relative* performance between teams, as they should, the current system struggles to meet that objective. With the league adding 11 teams since 1991-92 – and more on the way – the standings are more crowded and closer than ever.

At the end of 2024-25, nearly half the teams (15 out of the 32) were tied with another squad in the standings, as was the case the previous season (and 14 the year before that). Over the past two decades, this number averaged close to 13. We know that parity is paramount to the NHL, but the number of ties proves the current system is flawed. The final standings are crucial not only for playoffs but for draft rankings (including lottery probabilities), so the method used to calculate points is critical. In case of a tie, the first tiebreaker is the number of regulation wins, so why not introduce this aspect directly into the points system itself?

In 1983-84, the NHL instituted five-minute 5-on-5 overtime as a way to reduce the number of tie games, with two points to the winner, zero points for the loser and one point for each team in the event of a tie. The same number of points were at stake in overtime, so the difference in points between a win and a loss was kept at two. During the first 11 seasons of this new era, 18

> THE BIG BENEFIT OF THE HPM IS THAT IT INCENTIVIZES TEAMS **TO GO FOR THE WIN IN REGULATION INSTEAD OF PLAYING NOT TO LOSE**

DAVID KIROUAC-IMAGN IMAGES

percent of games went into overtime, and ties were broken in 35 percent of them. However, in the four seasons following the 1994-95 lockout, even though 20 percent of games were going into overtime, only 29 percent of ties were broken, as teams began adjusting their strategies in overtime to maximize their expectations in points, playing more conservatively than the NHL had hoped when it first instituted the extra frame. Securing the guaranteed point for a tie had become more important than going for the extra point in a win.

To increase the number of wins and reduce the number of ties even more, the NHL changed the five-minute overtime to 4-on-4 for 1999-2000 and amended its points system to the 2-2-1-0 currently in use today. In overtime, the winning team earned two points, just as before, but the big change was that the losing team earned one point. The attraction of the guaranteed point for a tie was gone because it was now credited to each team before overtime. So, with the two-point budget totally spent, the NHL brought in a third point for overtime. Not only did the total number of points allocated in overtime change to three instead of the traditional two that the NHL had used for more than 80 years, it also meant that the points at stake in overtime dropped from two to one. This did indeed reduce the number of ties, as the share of games going into overtime went up to 24 percent, and nearly half (46 percent) featured a winner.

Then, six years later, for 2005-06, the NHL made another change when it introduced the shootout in the event of a tie after overtime in order to ensure every game had a winner. The OT format remained the same until 2015-16, when it became 3-on-3.

The obvious generosity of the 2-2-1-0 system, however, developed one major drawback. Late in the third period with the score tied, teams adjusted their strategies to lean on conservative hockey, just as they'd done in overtime when it was first introduced. This allowed them to protect the point they were guaranteed to get if the game went to overtime while still preserving the possibility of earning two points for a win.

So, with all this in mind, how do we get back to a pure two-point system while still keeping one point at stake in OS? By carving a new system out of the current one by removing half a point from both the winner and the loser in the OS part of the 2-2-1-0 system. This would mean the winning team would earn 1.5 points and the losing team 0.5 points. Just like in the pure three-point system, the losing team in OS is still rewarded but only with 0.5 points.

This system, 2-1.5-0.5-0, which I named the "half-point model" (HPM), has the same level of competition as the 2-2-1-0 while maintaining a pure two-point system without a statistically awkward third point blurring the standings. The HPM also comes with an interesting feature in that it allows half-points to appear in the standings, reducing the number of teams involved in a tie. Under the HPM model, only four teams, instead of 15, would have ended up tied in the 2024-25 standings (see sidebar), with six for 2023-24 and 12 for 2022-23. In all three seasons, the same 16 teams were in the playoffs, and only a handful of playoff positions changed.

The big benefit of the HPM is that it incentivizes teams to go for the win in regulation instead of playing not to lose, as teams winning in OS earn 0.5 points less than the two points they would for a regulation win. The expectation of fewer points for a win in OS would change the way teams play in a tie game toward the end of the third period, stretching the excitement of OS into the latter part of regulation time.

> WE KNOW THAT PARITY IS PARAMOUNT TO THE NHL, **BUT THE NUMBER OF TIES PROVES THE CURRENT SYSTEM IS FLAWED**

If the standings should measure the relative performance of teams in competition, how relevant is it to include an extra point allocated only in OS? On this argument alone, this extra point should be abandoned, which would immediately improve the standings and make them more reflective of the relative performance of all 32 teams.

As it stands now, the current 2-2-1-0 system is well-intentioned but too generous. It's well-intentioned because the one point at stake in OS seems appropriate, so the HPM keeps this characteristic. It's too generous, however, because the extra point blurs the clarity of the standings, which are already crowded by 32 teams and a growing level of parity. More data is needed to achieve a definitive conclusion, but it is clear that the HPM should be examined seriously by the NHL for its potential future implementation. By adopting the HPM, the league can get back to a pure two-point system. H

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JAMES CAREY LAUDER-IMAGN IMAGES

CONNOR HELLEBUYCK

REIMAGINED STANDINGS

Using the HPM, fewer teams would have been tied with another club at the end of 2024-25

ATLANTIC	HPM PTS	2-2-1-0
Toronto Maple Leafs	100.5	108
Tampa Bay Lightning	95	102
Florida Panthers	91	98
Ottawa Senators*	88.5	97
Montreal Canadiens*	80.5	91
Detroit Red Wings	77.5	86
Buffalo Sabres	72	79
Boston Bruins	67.5	76

METRO	HPM PTS	2-2-1-0
Washington Capitals	102.5	111
Carolina Hurricanes	94	99
New Jersey Devils	84.5	91
Columbus Blue Jackets	79.5	89
New York Rangers	79.5	85
New York Islanders	72.5	82
Pittsburgh Penguins	69	80
Philadelphia Flyers	65	76

CENTRAL	HPM PTS	2-2-1-0
Winnipeg Jets	107.5	116
Dallas Stars	98.5	106
Colorado Avalanche	95.5	102
Minnesota Wild*	87.5	97
St. Louis Blues*	86	96
Utah Hockey Club	78.5	89
Nashville Predators	61	68
Chicago Blackhawks	53	61

PACIFIC	HPM PTS	2-2-1-0
Vegas Golden Knights	103	110
Los Angeles Kings	98	105
Edmonton Oilers	92.5	101
Calgary Flames	84	96
Vancouver Canucks	78	90
Anaheim Ducks	69.5	80
Seattle Kraken	69.5	76
San Jose Sharks	43	52

■ DENOTES TIED WITH ANOTHER TEAM | * DENOTES WILD-CARD PLAYOFF TEAM

CANADA
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TRAIL & TRIBULATIONS

The Manhattan Project, a pair of bombings and police spies all played a role in the story of when the Russians came to visit a small B.C. industrial town 65 years ago

BY RON VERZUH

EVERY HOCKEY FAN knows about the famous Summit Series when Team Canada beat the Soviets in 1972, but more than a decade earlier, another game also had a Cold War twist. This one put the Mounties on high alert for signs of off-ice intrigue in the small industrial town of Trail, B.C., a few miles from the United States border.

Let's go back to Jan. 27, 1960. Picture yourself at rinkside where the amateur Trail Smoke Eaters are set to face off with the Moscow Selects, a prominent national team from the Soviet Union. Sixty-five years ago, on that chilly winter Wednesday, the puck dropped, and the two teams battled it out in a game with more than 6,000 cheering fans jumping out of their seats at the Trail Memorial Centre.

The town's primary employer, the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada (Cominco, now Teck Resources),

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRAIL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES

WORLD BEATERS
A year after defeating the Russians in Trail, the Smoke Eaters became world champions as Team Canada.

donated the large recreational facility to the smelter city in 1949. It was a good PR move because most of the residents worked at the lead, zinc and fertilizer smelter, and all of them were avid hockey enthusiasts.

The Soviet team was on a 10-city tour of Canada and was riding a three-game winning streak when the skates hit the ice in Trail – and it looked like they might be headed for a fourth win, this time against the 1939 world-champion Smoke Eaters.

The Selects "zoomed this way and that and managed to notch four consecutive goals to assume a lead of 5-4," *Trail Daily Times* sports reporter Fred Collins said in his play-by-play game coverage. The Smokies "swarmed over, around and behind the net." Then, halfway through the third period, the Smokies scored again.

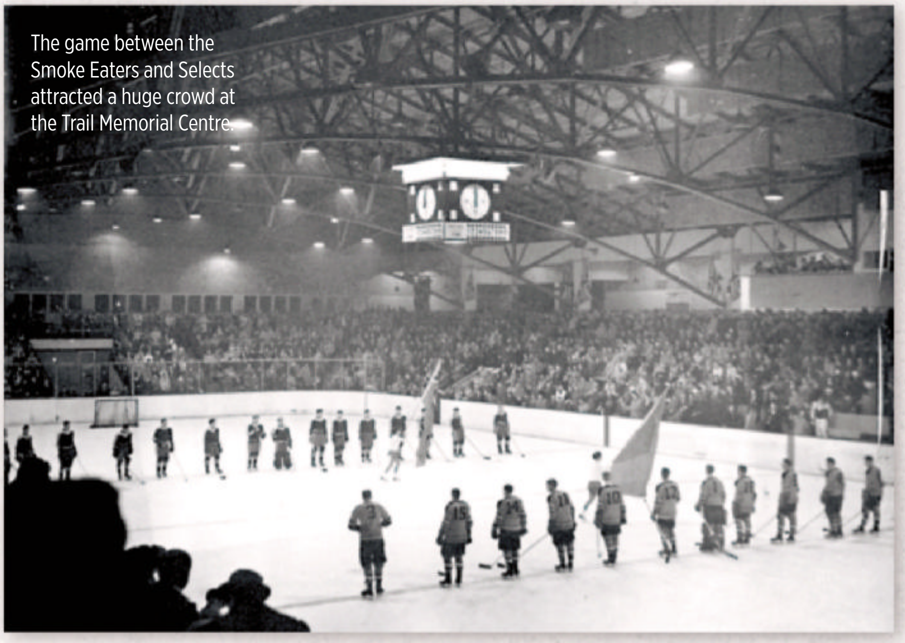
Vancouver Sun reporter Dick Beddoes added his colorful assessment of the game: "Igor Devousky fired on the Trail net in the last second of play, and goalie Seth Martin snared the baleful shot." Then Martin "tore out of his cage in a ponderous rush and folded his arms around defenseman Don Fletcher." At that point, hyperbole took over. "It was like holding a boa constrictor," Beddoes wrote, "the way Mr. Fletcher threshed and kicked and flung himself about in leaping transports of jubilation." Beddoes even included a reference to the Nazi siege of the Russian city of Stalingrad during the Second World War, exclaiming that the Selects "began to fight off the enemy as before Stalingrad."

Dick Dillman, writing in the *Spokane Spokesman Review*, described the action, noting that "almost equally exciting to the crowd, split half-and-half between Trail supporters and Moscow fans, was the second-period comeback by the Russians."

About 1,500 members of the Doukhobors, a local Russian religious sect, were crowded into the area as "Moscow rooters," perhaps prompting the local Mounties to erect what Beddoes called a "curtain" that "screened the Russians from inquisitors."

Smoke Eaters fans watched with pride as their home team came from behind in the last period, scoring three goals to win the game. The Soviets were "scrappy," a *Canadian Press* story declared, but it was the Smokies who took three of the four penalties in the "fast-skating exhibition." The Russians outshot the Trail team 26-24, but the final score on a breakaway goal was 7-6.

Preceding their arrival in Trail, the Selects were feted in Grand Forks, B.C., about 60 miles from Trail, where about 3,000 Doukhobor fans welcomed the team with Russian songs by the Union of Spiritual Communities of Christ choir. Choir leader John J. Verigin led the welcoming committee. The players dined on "a Russian dinner," reported the *Grand Forks Gazette*. It was the first borscht, vareniki (perogies) and pyrahi (pastry tarts) "they had enjoyed since landing in Canada." Doukhobors are traditionally vegetarian.



The game between the Smoke Eaters and Selects attracted a huge crowd at the Trail Memorial Centre.

The Russian team, 26 members in all, arrived in Trail Jan. 26, and the *Trail Times* took advantage of the visit with several local businesses purchasing ads to welcome the team. One of the ads was in Russian. The *Times* also displayed paid ads from local mayors, Helen's Flower Shop and Dutch Maid Bakery. Two oil companies, the parks commissioner, the West Kootenay Power and Light Company and Cominco hailed the Russian team in an ad that said, "Trail Welcomes Selects."

Before the game, the Russians "spent most of the day wandering about the streets of downtown Trail," police reported. Three sightseeing tours were cancelled because team manager Stanislav Melentev realized "the players would rather go shopping."

"The young players seemed quite interested in American popular records and had purchased the complete stock of Fabian records (from) the stores," police noted. At the time, teen idol Fabian Forte was a regular on the popular television show *American Bandstand*. News reports said Canadian heartthrob Paul Anka's records were also in demand. The players also stopped at the curling rink.

At this point, readers might ask why the police showed such interest in what seemed a peaceful international visit. Partly, they still had their Cold War-era marching orders to watch the Soviets. And things were still relatively hot and would get hotter with the Cuban Missile Crisis in the fall of 1962. But there was a local cloak-and-dagger attraction as well. Two, in fact.

First, Trail was a working-class town known nationally for its connection to the left-wing International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (which merged with the United Steelworkers in 1967). Back then, the workers at the massive lead and zinc smelter, one of the largest in the world, were represented by labor negotiator Harvey Murphy. Murphy was a lifelong communist who didn't hide the fact even at the height of the 'Red Scare' in the 1950s. He publicly declared himself "the reddest rose in the garden of labour." He had been interned during the Second World War as a potential threat to national security.

Police security and intelligence bureau agents had been observing his every move

PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAIL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES

since 1929, when he had his first tussle with Toronto's 'Red Squad.' Thirty years later, Murphy was in Trail that January to meet with the smelter's owner. He and the Russian team were staying at the Crown Point Hotel, arguably the best in the city. Above the hotel sat the vast industrial complex overlooking the smelter city along the Columbia River.

Murphy was in Trail for union negotiations, a task he had been doing since the B.C. Labour Relations Board certified the Mine-Mill local in 1944. He welcomed the Russians and gave each team member a Mine-Mill button. The gesture did not endear him to the suspicious police officers. Did they surmise that a clandestine meeting was afoot? They had already suspected Murphy of passing secrets to the Soviets. No less famous a Canadian than the late writer and historian Pierre Berton had said as much. "The smelter itself would be essential to Canada in the event of war," Berton wrote in *Maclean's* magazine on April Fool's Day 1951.

> THE SMELTER ITSELF WOULD BE ESSENTIAL TO CANADA IN THE EVENT OF WAR
>
> – **PIERRE BERTON**

During the Second World War, Cominco had an operation in Trail that was supplying the Manhattan Project, the American research project aiming to build an atomic bomb. Berton claimed the plant "is vulnerable to sabotage" and wrote that some of Murphy's fellow communists worked there.

Police took note of the imagined threat. Berton also claimed Murphy would be the worst person to take to a hockey game. Berton commented that Murphy's primary interest is the union, and "his henchmen dislike going to movies or hockey games with him because he's apt to take his eyes off the screen or blueline at crucial moments to talk shop."

If Murphy attended the game, he did so in a grumpy mood. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the country's main federation of unions and an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO), had again rejected his union's appeal for renewed affiliation. Mine-Mill had been expelled in the early 1950s. The day of the game, the *Times* reported the rejection on its front page, no doubt increasing police vigilance.

THE TRAIL OF THE TAPE

At the end of a back-and-forth game, the Smoke Eaters beat the Selects by a slim 7-6 scoreline.

> **GOSSIP SPREAD THAT THERE MIGHT BE A BOMBING IF THE RUSSIANS LOST**
> – DICK BEDDOES

The second reason for the intense police surveillance: constables were also looking for members of the Doukhobor sect. The sect had been in Canada since 1899 and had migrated to B.C.'s Kootenay region in 1908. "With the large number of Doukhobors present in the city, the players and officials were constantly being hounded by them, and it was not an unusual sight to see two or three players surrounded by some 30-40 Doukhobors, earnestly talking in Russian."

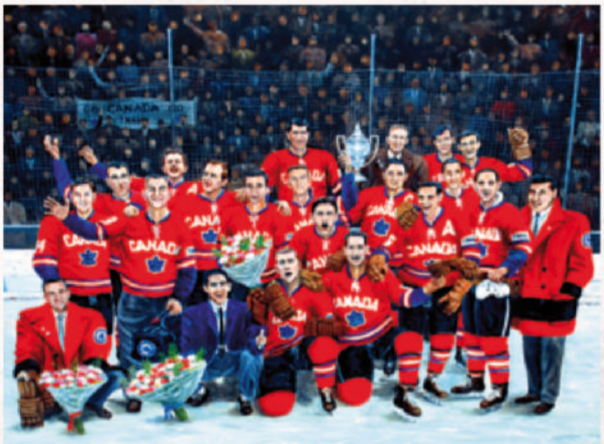
Constables were nervous, and their concern had merit. Two bombs had exploded during the Selects' visit. "It is felt that the bombs were set by members of the radical Sons of Freedom sect," and that "there is a definite connection with the setting of the bombs and the visit," police reported.

They kept watch on the radical Doukhobor sect at least as closely as they did Murphy, and they had done so since their arrival in Canada. "Gossip spread that there might be a bombing if the Russians lost," Beddoes speculated, "but the wild rumour did not become a solid fact." Two years later, however, police would again swarm over the Doukhobor community after a massive explosion hit a high-tension electrical tower, knocking out power to Cominco's Sullivan Mine, a major zinc producer for the Trail smelter in nearby Kimberley. Nativists and others blamed the Sons of Freedom. Police arrested 50 leaders, leading to many convictions for arson. The *Cranbrook Daily Townsman* called it "the beginning of the end of the Sons of Freedom."

On that snowy evening in the winter of 1960, the promise of *detente* between Doukhobors and nativists, who often called for their expulsion, was in evidence in the arena. But where hockey might have offered an olive branch, the radical Doukhobor sect was a definite deterrent.

Police reports did not say whether Murphy attended the game or commented on the win, but it did not escape their notice that plenty of hockey-loving members of his union were there. Local 480 president Al King, who was Murphy's fellow communist in the 1950s, could have been a third reason for the increased interest in the game. In fact, the Local 480 made the Selects honorary members, with Murphy officiating at the presentation.

Meanwhile, local pride continued to swell with headlines like "Well Done Smoke Eaters." Murphy went back to the bargaining table. The Russians travelled to their next game, but they would return for a rematch in 1966. Presumably, local police constables returned to their regular duties in the smoky Silver City. The "curtain," as Beddoes had put it, could now be lifted. **H**



TRAIL SMOKE EATERS
C

PAINTED LOVE
Not surprisingly, the Smoke Eaters are adored in Trail, as evidenced by the arena's mural.

TOP: PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAIL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES; MIDDLE+BOTTOM: PHOTOS COURTESY OF RON VERZUH

PWHL VANCOUVER

HOME AT LAST

A difference-maker for the Toronto Sceptres over the past two seasons, Hannah Miller is now looking to take on the same role with her hometown team in Vancouver **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

WHEN PWHL EXECUTIVES decided to expand the league's footprint out west by adding expansion teams in Vancouver and Seattle, some observers expressed concerns about the toll the increased travel would take on players.

The geography certainly didn't deter some of the game's biggest names from signing on with the new franchises, however. And after a hockey odyssey that took Hannah Miller across three continents, the North Vancouver native is confident that Vancouver's brain trust will have a solid handle on what's needed. This fall, the 29-year-old will be back in her hometown for the first time in more than a decade. And after playing on consecutive one-year deals in Toronto, she now has a three-year pact in hand.

Miller first developed her game at the Okanagan Hockey Academy in Penticton, B.C., then spent her college years at St. Lawrence in Upstate New York. But before she was drafted by Toronto in 2023, the versatile center spent parts of five pro seasons playing in Shenzhen, China – first as a member of the CWHL and then as part of the Russian women's league – plus one partial season in Sweden.

Hiccups were a regular part of the grind. In one memorable instance, Miller and her teammates had their celebrations of their 2020 Russian league title in Ufa cut short by the news the COVID pandemic was rapidly forcing the cancellation of international flights. Suddenly, players scrambled to book seats, lest they be trapped in Russia indefinitely. "Honestly, that's kind of the fun of it," Miller said. "We'll always look back and tell the crazy stories that people won't even be able to really understand – only those of us who were there. But I wouldn't change it for the world."

This fall, Vancouver will be coached by Brian Idalski, the same man who, for three seasons, helped Miller's KRS Vanke Rays navigate life and travel in the Russian league. That kind of experience should make planning PWHL Vancouver's daily routines a walk in the park. "He'll definitely have a leg up on everyone in terms of logistics and travel and dealing with all of that," Miller said.

Other KRS alums who will be suiting up in Vancouver this fall include Michela Cava, who is coming off back-to-back Walter Cups in Minnesota, and Finnish national-team legend Michelle Karvinen. It's not every day a 35-year-old becomes a first-round draft pick, but Karvinen is a special case. "She's definitely one of the most skilled, talented players I've ever been on the ice with," Miller said. "On top of that, she's just an incredible teammate and human. That's someone you want to come to work with every day."

When Miller returned to North America and declared for the first PWHL draft, her name wasn't called until the 13th round – when GM Gina Kingsbury and coach Troy Ryan tapped her to join Toronto. "I was sitting there thinking maybe I wasn't going to be drafted at all," she said. "I had been away for a long time playing, so they kind of took a chance on me there. And I'm so, so grateful."

Miller's skill, versatility and work ethic fuelled her transformation from an afterthought into a top-six mainstay. In 2023-24, she finished fourth in team scoring with seven goals and 14 points. In Year 2, as Miller took on a bigger role in the middle, her 10 goals and 24 points tied her for fifth in PWHL scoring. But even last season, she never imagined she'd get the chance to play pro in her hometown – a full-circle return to where she fell in love with hockey. "I don't even think it's fully sunk in yet," she said. "But it means a lot. I'm really, really excited." H

HOMETOWN HERO

Miller, a product of North Vancouver, B.C., has the chance to play a big role for PWHL Vancouver this season.

HEATHER POLLOCK/PWHL

TORONTO SCEPTRES

THREE TIMES SIX EQUALS TWO WON?

Elaine Chuli is back in Toronto – a.k.a. 'The Six' – with a third team hunting a second title – this time a PWHL crown **BY IAN KENNEDY**

WHEN ELAINE CHULI signed with the Toronto Sceptres in the off-season, it was a case of something old and something new. While she's a newcomer to the team, Chuli has a long history in Toronto.

The now-31-year-old backstopped the CWHL's Toronto Furies in 2018-19. Later, she starred in the NWHL and PHF for the Toronto Six from 2020 to 2023. And now, after two seasons in the PWHL with the Montreal Victoire, Chuli is returning to Toronto, this time wearing the blue and yellow of the Sceptres. And she is prepared to challenge Raygan Kirk for the starting role in the Toronto crease. "I think it's pretty special," Chuli said. "It's kind of crazy when I look back on my journey. Time has really flown by – from my time with the Furies in the CWHL, and the NWHL and PHF with the Toronto Six. I'm super grateful for my time with those organizations, and they've shaped me into the person and player I am today. It's pretty cool to be able to come back now and play in a third professional league and play with the Sceptres."

For Toronto, it's a major change. The team dealt 2024 PWHL goalie of the year and longtime Team Canada stopper Kristen Campbell to Vancouver at the draft and placed its trust in a new tandem headlined by Chuli. "Elaine brings consistency to our team," said Toronto GM Gina Kingsbury. "A proven goalie in the league, she brings a lot of traits we value both on and off the ice."

While Chuli is a proven commodity, with the Victoire, it came in an unfamiliar role: as a backup. It was the first time in her career – spanning from junior in Stoney Creek, Ont., to the NCAA in Connecticut and her previous professional stops – that Chuli was not the starting goalie. But she took the role in stride and chose to learn and grow from it while she backed up Ann-Renee Desbiens. "The last two years in Montreal, I learned a lot," Chuli said. "It was a different role for me than I've ever had in my career, which can bring challenges. But when you look at it properly, it happened for a reason at the moment it did in my career. I'm going to come out better for it. I learned a lot about being a teammate and what that looks like from the other side. I'm grateful for that, and I'm going to bring everything I learned to Toronto with the goal of winning a championship."

The last time Chuli donned a Toronto jersey, she was a champion, hoisting the Isobel Cup with the Six. The 2022 PHF goalie of the year hasn't forgotten that feeling. Her drive to bring another title to Toronto is greater than ever. "That's why I play the game," she said. "To win. I'm a super-competitive person. It would be a super-special group to do it with in Toronto. That's the goal, and that's my focus every day when I wake up to train, winning the Walter Cup. So it would mean a lot."

While Chuli is heading somewhere old, she wants something new: a title. She sees her time in Montreal as an important step in her career, but she's ready for more – both individually and with her new team. "I genuinely loved the city of Montreal," she said. "The team. The organization. They gave me the opportunity to play in this league, and I'm grateful for that. But there's more I can give and contribute, and I'm excited for that." H

HELLO, T.O.

Chuli will be part of a new-look goalie tandem with the Toronto Sceptres after spending two years in Montreal.

TOP: SHANE FRANCESCUT/MONTREAL VICTOIRE; BOTTOM: LAURENT CORBEIL/PWHL

PWHL SEATTLE

CONSULTING AN EXPERT

As GM of the expansion PWHL Seattle squad, Meghan Turner has had to learn a lot on the fly. Luckily for those in the Emerald City, that's something she's plenty familiar with **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

AS DANIELLE MARMER'S assistant GM in Boston for the past two seasons, Meghan Turner helped build an Inaugural Six PWHL franchise from the ground up.

Now, Turner is making the move west as the first GM of the expansion PWHL Seattle squad. And much like Marmer, with whom Turner played at Quinnipiac University for four seasons – from 2013-14 to 2016-17 – Turner is barely into her 30s. (Both women turned 31 this year.) Now, less than a decade after Turner committed to a career in the business world upon graduating from Quinnipiac, she is carving out a path in women's pro hockey. The career skills she has already developed have proven highly transferable.

While Turner played Div. I hockey with the Bobcats, the New Hampshire native was enrolled in an intensive program that allowed her to finish her degree in international business and earn her MBA in just four years. "It was tough to juggle," Turner said. "But the professors at Quinnipiac are really great and flexible and know the challenges of the athletes. And the coaching staff there prioritized academics as well."

From there, Turner joined the intense, fast-paced world of consulting as part of global business giant PricewaterhouseCoopers. In her projects, she learned to manage lengthy to-do lists, juggle priorities, build teams while delegating effectively and change course as needed. Her duties in Seattle have been strikingly similar. "I guess you could say there was no sticker shock as far as the level of work and this bit of the grind," Turner said. "It's back to the norm for me."

'BACK TO THE NORM'

Turner says her duties in the business world prepared her well for the work that awaited her as Seattle's first GM.

Timelines have been tight, too. Turner's hiring was announced just two weeks before the roster-building process for the Seattle and Vancouver expansion teams. There was an exclusive signing window that began on June 4. Thanks to a process structured to maintain the parity that has made the PWHL so compelling in its first two years, Turner was able to use that window to sign superstar Hilary Knight, the captain of Team USA's senior squad and one of the faces of the sport.

Then, Turner tapped Steve O'Rourke as Seattle's first coach. Hailing from nearby British Columbia, O'Rourke brings with him two decades of coaching experience across multiple levels – though he'll be working in the women's game for the first time. "He was inquisitive about what the team is going to be like and how we're going to treat the players to make sure that they are put in positions to succeed," Turner said. "I think that is really telling about who he is as a person and how he's going to coach."

Four days after O'Rourke's hiring was announced, he was sitting on the stage with Turner at the 2025 draft in Ottawa. Seattle's six picks were headlined by Ohio State captain Jenna Buglioni, a two-time NCAA champ and another west-coaster, from the Vancouver suburb of Port Moody.

Pro hockey is still new in the Emerald City, where the Kraken are entering their fifth season. The NHL club has rolled out the red carpet for its new PWHL sibling, which will share the state-of-the-art Climate Pledge Arena for games and the nearby Kraken Community Iceplex for practices.

Seattle also boasts a rich history of support for women's sports. The four-time WNBA-champion Storm draw crowds of more than 11,000 to Climate Pledge, and Lumen Field is home not only to the NFL's Seahawks and MLS' Sounders but also the National Women's Soccer League's Reign. "The Kraken and the Storm have been very supportive in helping us get up to speed," Turner said. "I think it's a really good and unique mix because Seattle has such a strong sports foothold across both men's and women's sports." H

PHOTOS BY PWHL SEATTLE

MINNESOTA FROST/PWHL

BOSTON FLEET

OF DEEP IMPORTANCE

Liz Schepers has done her scoring in the clutch through the PWHL's first two years. Now, she's looking for even more after leaving the two-time reigning champions **BY IAN KENNEDY**

AFTER SCORING back-to-back Walter Cup-winning goals with the Minnesota Frost, Liz Schepers was looking for a new opportunity.

Wait, what?

Despite her playoff heroics, Schepers carried the label of being a depth player through the PWHL's first two seasons. The 26-year-old center believes there's more to her game and she could score even more if given the opportunity.

So, this summer, in search of a landing spot that would allow her to prove just that, she signed as a free agent with the Boston Fleet. "It feels like a lot of us are getting to hit the reset button, with the opportunity to come in and work and earn more responsibility," Schepers said. "I'm still young in the league, but I've also had a lot of experience, and I hope I can use that to my advantage and the team's advantage."

Opportunity was the primary factor driving Schepers, who Fleet GM Danielle Marmer called "highly intelligent and detail-oriented," to make the move from Minnesota to Boston. But signing in Boston also allows Schepers to follow in the footsteps of her grandfather, Murray Oliver, who spent the bulk of his 1,100-game NHL career playing for the Minnesota North Stars and Boston Bruins.

WALT MORE CAN SHE DO?

Despite Schepers scoring the title-clincher in each of the first two Walter Cups, she's only seen depth duty.

In fact, it was during Oliver's seven seasons in Boston during the 1960s that Schepers' mother was born. Later, after finishing his career in Minnesota, Oliver helped his granddaughter find her deep passion for the game. "Whenever we would get together, hockey was always on," Schepers said. "It didn't matter who was playing…we were always watching, and I think that's where I learned to love the game and be a student of the game. He taught me early on to continue to learn the game and be a fan as much as you are a player."

Oliver didn't get to see how far those lessons would take Schepers, as he passed away in 2014 while she was in high school. He didn't see her win an NCAA national title with Ohio State or turn pro with the PHF's Minnesota Whitecaps. And he didn't see Schepers score the game-winning goal in back-to-back Walter Cup finals to earn the Minnesota Frost the PWHL's first two championship trophies. But Schepers knows how proud he would be, and she is excited to share another stop in a pro-hockey city with her grandfather.

Schepers also sees the parallel between the PWHL's Inaugural Six and the NHL's Original Six, in which her grandfather played as a member of the Bruins. "The way this league has gone, it kind of mirrors the time in the NHL that he played in, the Original Six Era," she said. "He had summer jobs while being an NHL player. He was a carpenter in the summer. He took classes at Boston University when he was here. It's really interesting to see all these years later that we're in similar positions. I know he'd be extremely proud, and I definitely feel that."

More than anything, Schepers recalls that her grandfather loved that she had a passion for hockey and was having fun – points that are still true today. While she's following in the family footsteps, Schepers wants to continue building her own legacy, which includes stepping into a bigger offensive role as a newcomer with the Fleet. "It's a risk leaving home and what I had in Minnesota," Schepers said. "But, at the end of the day, I'm just really excited for the opportunity. It's really sparked something in me to go out and prove something and take those next steps in my career. I'm going to do whatever the team needs me to do, but I don't want to be put in the box of being a depth player… because I feel like I have more in me, and I'm excited to prove that and earn those chances."

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VALUES ARE APPARENT

Rem says he and his younger brother continue to work to this day on the lessons their parents instilled in them.

BAKERSFIELD CONDORS

FAITH & FAMILY

United by an upbringing that forged a fiery sense of competition, brothers Rem and Rhett Pitlick are raring at the chance to finally play pro hockey together **BY DILLON COLLINS**

THERE'S AN ADAGE THAT reads, "The brothers who play together, stay together." Rem and Rhett Pitlick will put that to the test this season with AHL Bakersfield.

The brothers agreed to terms with the Condors in late June, with Rem signing a one-year deal and Rhett inking for two seasons. It will be the brothers' first chance to play side by side in a professional setting. Rem – a 28-year-old veteran of 132 NHL games with Nashville, Minnesota, Montreal and Chicago – is coming off an abbreviated 2024-25 season that saw him suit up for 18 contests with the San Jose Barracuda. Meanwhile, 24-year-old Rhett parlayed a successful college career into an amateur tryout with the Condors last spring, during which he had six points in six games.

The Pitlick brothers have known nothing but sport and competition throughout their lives, having grown up the sons of bruising NHL blueliner Lance Pitlick and two-time Big Ten-champion gymnast Lisa Pitlick. "We were blessed with so many ponds and lakes around," Rhett said of the boys' Minnesota upbringing from his father's shooting-and-training room. "Thankfully, our dad bought a house with a pond in the backyard. He was always making sure we were experiencing the State of Hockey at its best."

GETTING RHETT DOWN TO IT

The younger Pitlick bro started his pro career off hot, scoring six points in a six-game tryout with Bakersfield.

Added Rem: "We're so fortunate for both our parents – and obviously our dad playing in the NHL. He trained us our whole lives. So, everything's just been 'hockey, hockey, hockey' here."

Perseverance, grit and skill were all passed down the family line. Lance was a late-bloomer, breaking into the NHL at 27. After debuting for the Ottawa Senators in 1995, Lance went on to play 393 NHL games across eight seasons and also saw action with the Florida Panthers. "My dad, his story is a very humble story," Rem said. "Playing his first NHL game at 27. He's really into mindsets and all those different types of things. I would say, on behalf of both Rhett and me, it's just the life lessons and the people skills that we're still working and evolving to be better at that."

Lance's nephew Tyler Pitlick – cousin to Rem and Rhett – has played 420 NHL games with eight teams, and at 33 is with Minnesota, his ninth team.

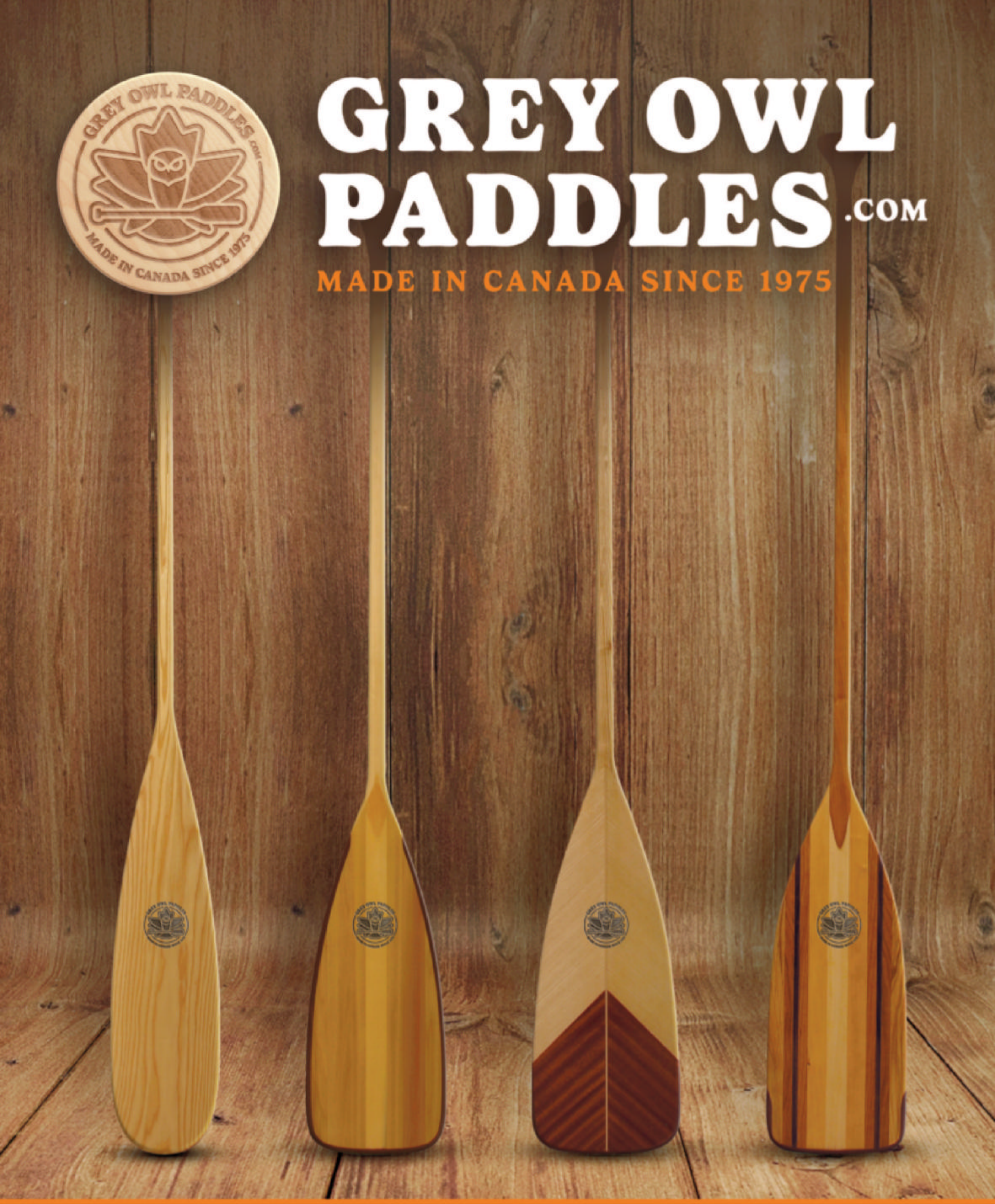
Faith, too, has been a key facet of the Pitlicks' lives in the sport. Both Rem and Rhett were standouts at the University of Minnesota (though Rhett transferred to Minnesota State as a senior), and both tapped into their faith while navigating the rigors of amateur hockey. "Faith has become a really big part of my life," Rem said. "It was really interesting to see that firsthand in a hockey dressing room."

Rhett added that a clear mindfulness of why he plays has helped him navigate his personal and professional life. "You can become super successful and rich from the NHL," he said. "But what are you going to do with that wealth and background? Doing it for your family, doing it for God and, more importantly, making it with your loved ones. So, it's not all about you making it but bringing everyone with you.

"And faith really helps the intention of everything you're doing. What you're playing for. Why you are playing. And it's just made my foundation stronger in why I play hockey and brought more love into my game. More skill and love, less fight and fear in some sense."

Both former college standouts who possess a great shot and play a strong, two-way game, Rem and Rhett will look to make an impact in Bakersfield this fall. And they are hoping to showcase some brotherly magic and unbridled chemistry in the process. "I think there's a sort of chemistry that Rem and I have that just makes sense to us," Rhett said. "We've been playing hockey together since practically two years old. And there's something that other teammates don't have that we do because we have had all these years together. And I just take it for what it's worth. People always tell us that our chemistry is insane. So, I hope that we can show that and make other people think beautiful thoughts about the poetry we write on ice." H

REM: ANDREEA CARDANI/SAN JOSE BARRACUDA; RHETT: PHOTO BY BAKERSFIELD CONDORS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CALGARY WRANGLERS

CALGARY CALLING

A staple of the local hockey scene, Brett Sutter takes over the Wranglers bench looking to make his own impact **BY DILLON COLLINS**

FROM THE FAMILY FARM in Viking, Alta., to the bench of the AHL's Calgary Wranglers, Brett Sutter has lived and breathed Calgary hockey for much of his life.

"I'm an Alberta kid, born and raised," Sutter said. "There are many people in the (Calgary Flames) organization who have been around since Day 1 when I was here, so you have those close relationships. I'm very fortunate that I've called Calgary home in the off-season for the last 15 years or so."

Brett is a second-generation member of the legendary Sutter hockey family – the son of two-time Calgary bench boss Darryl – and was drafted by the Flames in the sixth round in 2005. In his 17 seasons as a pro, Brett logged 60 NHL games (including 18 with the Flames) and played the final 116 games of his AHL career with the Calgary Wranglers. That final stint took him to 1,090 career AHL games – fourth-most in league history.

And while the move from player to Wranglers assistant coach came immediately following his retirement at the end of 2023-24, Sutter admits he was hesitant when thinking about hanging up his skates. "For me, I was always taking it one day at a time and trying to be the best player and teammate I could be on any given day," he said. "I had that one-track mind. I think that's part of the reason that enabled me to play for so long. In the back of my mind, I knew I always wanted to stay in the game, but until I decided to hang up the skates, I wasn't 100 percent sure on what capacity that would be."

Despite Sutter accepting the Wranglers' head job after just a single season as an assistant, his status as one of the AHL's most respected figures makes him well-suited to navigate one of hockey's more unpredictable leagues. "You try to grow from every experience you've had in the AHL," he said. "I was fortunate enough to play for a long time and have a lot of different experiences and people to learn from. Those are experiences you want to be able to pass on to your players and staff. I think you try to build your bank and learn as much as you can. For me, it's putting my stamp on that now as a head guy here in Calgary."

And while developing his coaching style will take time, Sutter will employ both hard-nosed and player-first brands of coaching. "Until you're in that role full time, you don't know fully what kind of coach you're going to be," Sutter said. "I envision a balance. There are still times guys need to be put in line, so to speak, and there are going to be days where you're pushing and pulling. As long as you have that trust, communication and belief within the dressing room that we're all pulling this rope in the same direction, that's the best way to approach it."

The mandate for an AHL coach is twofold: develop players and win. Sutter hopes to hone the skills of the next wave of Flames while creating a team-first, cohesive culture with the Wranglers. "You have to balance the development side and the winning side," he said. "But creating a winning culture doesn't necessarily mean you're going to win every night. It just means you're setting yourself up to do the right things every day. The goal for us now, with this next wave of draft picks and guys that are going to become Wranglers next year, is to make sure they're ready to step right in. Not only to play but into that culture of, 'We're all in this together. We're going to buy in and play the Flames' way.' I'm looking forward to being a part of that.'

BALANCING GAME

Sutter, who is entering his first season leading Calgary's bench, will look to balance winning and development.

ERIC BOLDT/CALGARY WRANGLERS

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'KILLER' INSTINCT

Tyson Gilmour is working his way up, but he displays the same grit that helped make his father a Hall of Famer **BY STEPHEN KERR**

TYSON GILMOUR HAD MANY car rides with his father after games, but one in particular stands out.

He was about 12, and it was after a game in which he appeared to be going through the motions. His father noticed and, after a few minutes of silence, asked, "Do you really want to play this game?"

"Yeah," Tyson replied.

"Well, if you want to play, you have to treat every game like it's big," his father said. "You can't just go out there, float around and look like you're not interested."

Doug Gilmour was no ordinary hockey dad. He played in 1,474 NHL games over 20 seasons, won a Stanley Cup with the Calgary Flames and was inducted into the Hall of Fame. So, even a pre-teen like Tyson was wise enough to take his father's advice to heart. "He made me understand there is no 'small' game," the 27-year-old Worcester Railers center said. "He wasn't chewing me out. He was trying to see where my head was at."

Growing up with a Hall of Famer for a dad isn't always easy. Even as a youth, Tyson endured the comparisons, but he nevertheless looks upon his father's success with pride. "Just hearing the stories of how it was back in the day compared to now, little details you don't really think about, it's pretty awesome," said Tyson, who had just turned five when his father retired in 2003.

A native of Toronto, Tyson first stepped on the ice at three. He played with his older brother, Jake, who spent two seasons in the OHL. While hockey may have been in the bloodlines, it didn't come naturally to Tyson. "I remember quitting twice that year because the equipment was so heavy," he said. "But every time I got home, I put on the rollerblades, and my brother and I would play on the driveway for hours."

Tyson played four seasons at NCAA Div. III SUNY-Geneseo, registering 31 goals and 93 points in 105 games. He signed with the Railers in July after winning a President's Cup with the SPHL's Evansville Thunderbolts last season.

METTLE RAILER

Gilmour brings a championship pedigree to Worcester after winning a SPHL title with Evansville last season.

PHOTOS BY EVANSVILLE THUNDERBOLTS

In 50 games with Evansville, he recorded 18 goals and 37 points. During the playoffs, he tallied four goals and five points in seven games. Tyson also appeared in three games with the ECHL's Maine Mariners.

At 6-foot-2 and 205 pounds, he doesn't face the same questions about size his father did. He has, however, adopted the same never-back-down style of play that earned Doug his 'Killer' nickname. "I think a lot of (that physicality) rubbed off on me," Tyson said. "But when it gets down to big games, you always want to be a player who shows up, and you always want to be a player the other team doesn't want to play."

That physicality, along with Gilmour's playoff experience, was a major selling point for Railers coach-GM Nick Tuzzolino. "Tyson is a big, heavy, two-way player," Tuzzolino said after the signing. "His play style was a very important part of Evansville's SPHL championship run. I'm hoping he can bring that hardnose hockey and that experience to our culture this year."

The Railers finished 34-30-3-5 in 2024-25, good for 76 points. While mulling over his options for this season, Gilmour was impressed with the coach's honest assessment of how he would be utilized. "As soon as he gave me a call, I could tell he seemed like a straightforward, honest guy," Gilmour said. "It was a no-brainer."

Along with physicality, Gilmour has great vision and puck-protection skills. His biggest challenge is foot speed, something that caused a lot of NCAA Div. I coaches to shy away from him. But Gilmour believes he's made significant strides the past couple of years.

"Skating's such a big part of hockey, especially nowadays," he said. "Everyone is getting faster and faster every year. That's one thing I'm always working toward, on top of edgework, having a good first step and to not lose speed after turns." H

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Eagles owner Irwin Simon welcomed Clarke to the Cape Breton Eagles during a press conference in June.

CAPE BRETON EAGLES

CROSS-COUNTRY FLIGHT

From a San Diego Gull to a Cape Breton Eagle, Jason Clarke aims for new heights on the East Coast **BY WILL MACLAREN**

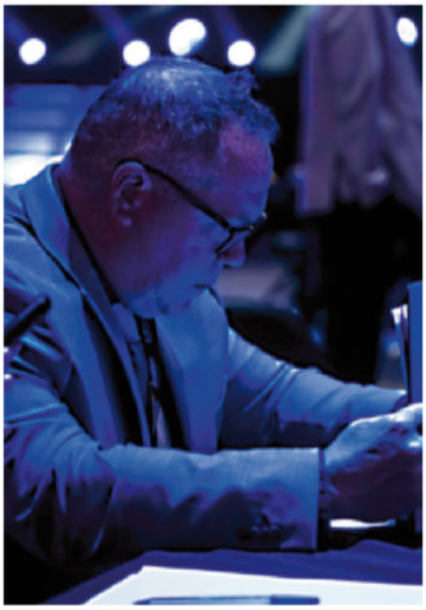
TALK TO JASON CLARKE for only a few minutes and one of the aspects of coaching he values the most becomes apparent: the people he's encountered.

As he walks into the dressing room as the Cape Breton Eagles' new coach – he is the fifth person to hold the position since November 2021 – he'll call upon many names from his past to establish the guiding principles he hopes will create stability for a franchise in flux.

Among those who have aided the 52-year-old Clarke are his contemporaries from the Anaheim Ducks system. He finished a two-year stint as an assistant with the AHL's San Diego Gulls in 2024. "I went there to get better and surround myself with people who had a lot of hockey knowledge," Clarke said. "I got to work with Roy Sommer, Ryan Getzlaf, Rob DiMaio, Pat Verbeek and Scott Niedermayer.

"I thought it was important to surround myself with people like that. I wanted to use that experience and get back to being a head coach. Now, I look forward to transferring those lessons and using those new tools in my toolbox when facing the new challenges that await me with the Eagles."

For all the notable figures who've helped Clarke refine his abilities behind the bench, it was Sylvain Couturier who made the decision to return to the QMJHL an easy one. Couturier was the GM with the Acadie-Bathurst Titan when Clarke last worked as a head coach in 2021-22, before Couturier became Cape Breton's GM in the summer of 2022. "He is why I made the move," Clarke said. "We developed a really good relationship during my time in Bathurst. We see the game the same way and believe (in the philosophy) that it takes the same types of players, regardless of position, to create a winner. He just surrounds himself with good people and doesn't micromanage. He is 1,000 percent the reason why I'm in Cape Breton."



'WORK ETHIC AND ATTITUDE'
Clarke, back in the 'Q' after two years in the AHL, wants to help develop his players' mindsets on and off the ice.

Before becoming a Titan, Clarke was a king in his hometown of Carleton Place, Ont. There, he took ownership of the Carleton Place Canadians organization that went on a dominant run in their Jr. A league, cranking out four consecutive titles and a .790 winning percentage from 2014 to 2017. "We had a lot of good people in Carleton Place and players who came from really good families," Clarke said. "We also had kids who wanted to come to Carleton Place to be student-athletes and be a better person. We focused on teaching life skills through the game they loved."

The structure established in that community is one he wants to implement in his latest hockey home. "We want to have a great attitude and be a hardworking team – similar to the community," Clarke said. "Whether you're a player or a coach, you can always control your work ethic and attitude. We will strive for excellence on both of those characteristics to create a tradition of excellence. That's what's most important to me."

That's an ideal sentiment Clarke is bringing to a part of the world known for its idyllic scenery. Cape Breton is a paradise for hikers and golfers, and Clarke is well aware of the extracurricular activities available to him. It's the latter one that will be the most tempting, but he'll do his best to show restraint. "Will I sneak in the odd round here and there? Sure," Clarke said. "I'd like to play golf every day, but we'd probably wind up in last place. I'd rather be in first place and not playing than be in last place and at Cabot Links every day."

Sounds like Clarke already has the swing of things. H

PHOTOS BY CAPE BRETON EAGLES

BRINGING SOME BITE

After three successful years with the Huskies, Zonnon joins an Armada squad that's primed to contend.

BLAINVILLE-BOISBRIAND ARMADA

ONE LAST SWING

Following an off-season filled with excitement, Bill Zonnon is looking forward to playing close to home and chasing a QMJHL title with Blainville-Boisbriand **BY WILL MACLAREN**

THE CITY OF PITTSBURGH is already getting to know Bill Zonnon.

Having never attended an MLB game, Zonnon not only took in a Pirates game this summer, he started the evening by throwing out the first pitch along with the Penguins' two other 2025 first-round picks, Ben Kindel (11th overall) and Will Horcoff (24th overall). "I just wanted to make sure it reached the catcher," Zonnon said.

Zonnon, selected 22nd overall, also received rave reviews from team brass – the Pens, not the Pirates – after his first development camp. It seems inevitable the 18-year-old center will eventually make the Steel City his home, but first, he'll complete his junior career near his actual roots. An off-season trade landed him with the Blainville-Boisbriand Armada – about a 40-minute northwest drive from his hometown of Montreal. "I haven't been home for a little bit, so to come back and be part of a great organization with a great group of guys is a perfect way to cap it off," Zonnon said. "I'm already looking forward to having my family close by and having a lot of family and friends in the stands."

Zonnon's time away from his East Montreal domicile began five years ago with a successful stint at Northwood, a boarding school nestled in scenic Lake Placid, N.Y. After that, it was off to QMJHL Rouyn-Noranda, where he developed his skills as a dynamic two-way center the past three seasons. "A lot of the mentors I had in Rouyn-Noranda led to (my development)," he said. "Sitting around the room at 16, we had our captain, Edouard Cournoyer, who was a great leader and a great guy. At my billet house, I had (Tampa Bay prospect) Dyllan Gill living with me. Even on the road, I found myself hanging around our 20-year-olds. I have to give credit to our coaching staff as well, who encouraged me to be the best version of myself. They really believed in me as both a player and a leader. I look forward to bringing all of that to Blainville."

Zonnon isn't the only one bringing something to the table for a powerful Armada club looking to win their first QMJHL title. The acquisition of Zonnon brings the total of NHL-drafted talents to six. Up front, he'll join forces with fellow 2025 first-rounder Justin Carbonneau, who committed to a return to the 'Q' after a hard sell by NCAA suitors this summer. Vegas Golden Knights draftee Mateo Nobert will provide further primary scoring, while Philadelphia Flyers prospect Spencer Gill makes his way over from Rimouski, having recovered from a severe ankle injury that kept him out of last season's Memorial Cup. Nashville Predators prospect Jakub Milota, who arrived via off-season trade, will carry the load in net.

It's a formidable lineup – one that gave Zonnon's Huskies all they could handle last year. "Anytime we played them, we had to be aware of how good they were offensively," he said. "Whether it was their top forwards or their defense, they feed off offense and have a lot of guys who can create. We had to make sure we were good defensively. I'm looking to add to that, whether it's driving offense, being responsible defensively or adding a little grit."

Doing it a short drive from his front door makes it that much sweeter for Zonnon, who is clearly feeding off the excitement being generated by those he's closest to. "It's pretty crazy the number of people who are already planning on coming to watch me play," he said. "Between friends, family, neighbors and teachers, the support I'm going to get from people who've been close to me through the years is going to be amazing. I'm already looking forward to taking it all in."

Now that the first pitch is out of the way, Zonnon is looking to hit a home run.

JEAN LAPOINTE/ROUYN-NORANDA HUSKIES

WINDSOR SPITFIRES

DON’T WRITE IT IN PENN

Caden Harvey’s path to the NCAA once seemed concrete. But an impressive showcase by the staff in Windsor has him making a pre-college detour **BY TONY FERRARI**

FOR PENNSYLVANIA NATIVE Caden Harvey, the OHL was so far out of his mind that it wasn’t even really a consideration. Harvey viewed the USHL as the natural incubator for his development, given he was an American kid who dreamed of playing hockey at the school his father attended.

That plan remained unchanged last fall, even after the NCAA changed its eligibility rules to allow CHLers to make the jump. Harvey was still just as happy to take the step into the USHL for a couple of years and then head to Penn State. The OHL was still out of sight, out of mind – especially since Harvey wasn’t selected in the first ‘O’ draft for which he was eligible. “My goal has always been to play at Penn State,” he said. “It’s a beautiful campus, the coaches seem really great both on and off the ice, and my dad going there really made it an easy decision.”

Things began to change at the 2025 OHL draft in April, when the Windsor Spitfires traded for an extra fifth-round pick and used it to select Harvey in his second year of eligibility. It was a risk, but it was one Spits GM Bill Bowler and his staff felt strongly about.

Usually, when major-junior teams take an American player of Harvey’s caliber, they do so with a late-round pick, knowing the player is unlikely to ever suit up for them but hoping to get a potential home-run acquisition at a low cost. The management staff in Windsor saw a chance to add a player who could be a vital piece, and they were willing to spend a relatively high pick, believing that, with the new NCAA rules, they would have an easier time convincing Harvey to join the team.

Harvey made the decision to come to Windsor and participate in the team’s orientation camp after being drafted, but the idea of playing in the OHL was still an afterthought. He intended to take the trip only to ensure he was leaving no stone unturned and was putting himself in the best position to succeed in his NHL draft season.

Upon his arrival, Harvey was wowed by the facilities and the people in Windsor. He felt that everyone in the building, from the coaching staff to the trainers to everyone else around the team, was united by the common goal of reaching the next level. “It was really impressive how everyone carried themselves,” Harvey said. “Everyone was acting like this was the pros because they wanted to get to the pros. On the ice, we treated things professionally and seemed to be working toward being an NHLer with every rep.”

When Harvey made the trip back home after camp, he finally began considering the OHL as a legitimate option. For a kid who had previously written off the league in his head, the trip was filled with positive takeaways. It didn’t take long for Harvey to alter course and decide the Spitfires were going to be his landing spot for the next couple of years.

Just over a month later, on June 4, Harvey signed with the Spitfires and officially became a part of the team’s plans for 2025-26. The 17-year-old’s speed, versatility and offensive touch will be a boon to a squad looking to once again become an OHL contender. “They made it really easy on me,” Harvey said. “I want to be where I can showcase my game the best I can to try and get drafted into the NHL, and I think Windsor can really help with that.”

At the end of the day, many factors played into Harvey’s decision to stray from what was comfortably the plan for years. The enjoyable experience he had exploring the city during his visit certainly helped, as did the Spits boasting a highly skilled lineup full of 2007- and 2008-born talent. The chance to showcase his skills on a platform like the CHL’s didn’t hurt, either. But nothing was more impactful in Harvey choosing the Spitfires than the professional atmosphere in Windsor. “They treated us like pros in camp,” Harvey said. “I think we are going to be a very good team because of that. The team set the bar for the team, and now, it’s on us as players to reach it.” H

TOP: PHOTO BY WINDSOR SPITFIRES; BOTTOM: TERKA SABOVA/HOCKEY SLOVAKIA

GUELPH STORM

GERMANY TO GUELPH

Growing up playing on two continents, Jaakko Wycisk has taken the unconventional path on his way to stardom **BY TONY FERRARI**

THE JOURNEY TO BEING selected second overall in the 2025 OHL draft was a bit unorthodox for Jaakko Wycisk, the newest member of the Guelph Storm. For Wycisk, it was just the reality of being born to a father who was in the midst of a pro-hockey career.

His father, Austin, played four years at Canadian schools and then began a lengthy professional career, playing a dozen years in Germany, from the fourth tier all the way to the DEL – Germany’s top men’s league. Although the elder Wycisk returned to the Windsor area every summer, his hockey career took him back to Germany in the fall.

When Austin and his wife, Jaana, started their family, that meant Jaakko made that journey every year as well. As with most hockey parents, they got their child on skates as soon as they could. Jaakko’s minor-hockey days were spent in Germany, learning in a different pipeline than almost any other Canadian kid his age.

No two coaches run practice the exact same way, and each minor-hockey organization also has its own style and quirks, but it was a different game for Wycisk. He practised in half-ice games, and there was plenty of ice time to focus on skill work and attention to detail.

When there was a chance to be creative, it was encouraged. Structure could be taught, but the natural instincts of a gamebreaker were fostered through trial and error or experimentation. There wasn’t the pressure of growing up as the next Canadian superstar or the culture that’s been developed over decades of perceived hockey superiority.

It was simple. Hockey was played because it was fun. Obviously, at the highest levels of minor hockey, things were intense, but there was an ease to everything. Wycisk is thankful for the unique opportunity that he had as a kid. “Playing in small areas or half-ice games forced me to focus on problem-solving and finding my way out of trouble,” he said. “It also created physical play all over the ice. When you couldn’t get out of trouble, you tried to play through contact. It didn’t always work, but it helped you figure out what did work.”

Comparing that experience with those of his friends back home was always interesting to Wycisk. Whenever he got on the ice with them, it was like he was a step ahead. His skating was fluid, and he had the puck on a string. He could protect the puck against pressure and escape with his agility. Wycisk credits his advancement to his time overseas. “Talking to friends when I’d come back to Windsor in the summer,” he said, “it always felt like there was a big difference in how our seasons went.”

When the Wycisks came back to Ontario, hockey remained a family affair. Austin coached Jaakko with the U-16 Sun County Panthers. While Jaakko was grateful for his father’s guidance and experience as a pro, his father was insistent that Jaakko earn every minute of ice he got. “My dad never took it easy on me,” Wycisk said. “He knew one day he wouldn’t be my coach, and I needed to get used to working for my opportunity. The bar was set higher for me than others, but he knew how to separate being a coach and being Dad.”

Wycisk was generally considered one of three players who could have gone first overall in the OHL draft in the spring. He was just happy to be in that conversation. Reflecting on his journey, Wycisk is appreciative of the long, winding road that he went down. “I loved playing in Germany when I was a kid,” he said. “It was a very different way of doing things compared to what my buddies at home were doing.” H

TOP-TIER TALENT
Wycisk, the second-overall pick in the 2025 OHL draft, credits his upbringing for helping him get to where he is.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GUELPH STORM

READY TO COMPETE
Having learned what it takes to win, Preston feels the Chiefs are suited to make another long playoff run.

SPOKANE CHIEFS

CALM, COOL AND COLLECTED

Having absorbed lessons on and off the ice, Mathis Preston is ready to make his own impact with the Chiefs **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

ONE OF THE TOP prospects for the 2026 NHL draft, Mathis Preston is already known for his deft stickhandling and sharp hockey sense. The Spokane Chiefs center is equally dextrous in an interview situation, adroitly ducking a query about his personal objectives for this season.

"I kind of keep them to myself," he said. "I just try and work hard every day, fall in love with the process and not get too focused on the future. I try to stay in the present."

One special moment that he couldn't have anticipated will arrive on Nov. 14. On that day, when the Chiefs visit the expansion Penticton Vees, the British Columbia native will get his first chance to play WHL hockey in his hometown. "That's going to be an awesome game," he said. "It's great for the town, too. They were ready to move to a better league."

The Vees' home at the South Okanagan Events Centre has long been the envy of the BCHL and set the stage for success, with the organization capturing five of the 15 league championships awarded since the dual-sheet facility opened in September 2008. It's also home to the Okanagan Hockey Academy, which has produced NHL first-rounders including Curtis Lazar, Michael Rasmussen and Cole Sillinger. That's where Preston played his youth hockey in the winter, while soaking up the region's idyllic lakeside vibes in the summer.

With the spotlight brightening as he enters his NHL draft year, Preston is already slotted near the top of a stacked cohort. He made his Hockey Canada debut at 15 at the 2024 Winter Youth Olympics in South Korea. Later that year, he added a gold medal and was voted to the tournament all-star team at the 2024 World U-17 Hockey Challenge. And this summer, as part of Team Canada at the 2025 Hlinka Gretzky Cup, he reunited with his U-17 Hockey Challenge coach Mathieu Turcotte for his first road trip to Europe.

Last season, Spokane reached the WHL final for the first time since winning the league championship and the Memorial Cup in 2008. Preston followed up his 23-goal, 45-point regular season by leading WHL rookies with 16 points – including nine goals – in 20 playoff games.

It was an impressive showing for the offensively gifted Preston, who turned 17 in July. He also seized the chance to soak up tips and information from talented teammates, including captain Berkly Catton and 2025 WHL scoring champ Andrew Cristall, in the high-pressure setting. "I picked their brains a lot and asked them lots of questions," Preston said. "It was great to learn from them."

Coach Brad Lauer joined the Chiefs last season after previous stops behind benches in the NHL, AHL and WHL. He won a 'Dub' title heading the Edmonton Oil Kings' bench in 2022. Lauer also played 323 NHL games during his playing days.

With his wide-ranging experience, Lauer focuses not just on wins and losses but also on developing his players for future success – even the youngsters. "He's not trying to make you the best WHL player," Preston said. "He's trying to make you the best NHL player you can be. He did a really good job teaching the little things and the defensive side of the puck. Being an offensive player, you have to be able to do both. He helped me with that a lot."

Preston may be shy about sharing his personal goals, but he's bullish on the Chiefs' prospects for 2025-26. "Some guys are leaving, but I don't think it matters," he said. "We have a young core. Everyone's a year older, and I think we're going to make a good push again." H

LARRY BRUNT/SPOKANE CHIEFS

PRINCE GEORGE COUGARS

ONE HECKUVA ‘TER’

Terik Parascak rode an incredible breakout WHL campaign to becoming a Washington Capitals first-round draft pick in 2024 **BY CAROL SCHRAM**

MORE THAN A YEAR after his jaw dropped when his name was called 17th overall by the Washington Capitals at The Sphere in Las Vegas, Terik Parascak isn’t resting on his laurels as a 2024 first-round pick.

“Every day is a new day to keep working, keep improving myself and my game to get to the NHL one day,” he said. “After the draft’s done, it doesn’t matter where you go. It’s what you do after that. That’s kind of how I look at it, but I wouldn’t say it’s even fully sunk in yet.”

Fair enough. The Lethbridge, Alta., native went from a fourth-round selection by the Prince George Cougars in the 2021 WHL draft to a 105-point 2023-24 rookie campaign with the Cougars in his NHL draft year. That had scouts scrambling to evaluate a breakout so dramatic that even Parascak didn’t see it coming. “If you’d asked me at the start of that season, I would probably say, ‘There’s no way,’ ” he said.

Parascak played just four games with the Cougars in 2022-23. But starting in training camp the next fall, coach Mark Lamb gave Parascak top-six minutes and special-teams assignments on both sides of the puck. “I guess as the season progressed, my expectations started to change,” Parascak said. “I just kept going with it.”

Playing high-IQ hockey with a healthy serving of skill, Parascak shone in 2023-24. But his achievements were just one element of the Cougars’ magical campaign that season. They edged out the Portland Winterhawks by one point to finish first in the West, then dropped just one game as they dispatched the Spokane Chiefs and Kelowna Rockets on the way to their first Western Conference final appearance since 2007.

Parascak – who signed his entry-level contract on the final day of the Caps’ 2024 development camp – would be joining an organization on the rise and guided by 2025 Jack Adams Trophy winner Spencer Carbery.

When Parascak returned for training camp in September of 2024, he savored the chance to practise with Alex Ovechkin, skate in a pre-season game at Capital One Arena and enjoy an inside glimpse into day-to-day NHL life. And while T.J. Oshie couldn’t suit up for games last season, Parascak got to spend time with a player he had long admired when the veteran right winger joined the Caps for a pre-season trip to Columbus.

Parascak ended his 2024-25 season in Prince George with 82 points. He added 10 more in a first-round playoff loss to Portland, then finished his year with his first official taste of pro hockey – a game with Washington’s AHL affiliate, the Hershey Bears. Parascak was ranked the No. 5 prospect for Washington in THN’s Future Watch 2025 but didn’t finish among the top 100 league-wide.

He’s crystal clear on his marching orders from the Capitals’ development staff. “Trying to be able to battle with those guys in the corners and along the walls is a big thing,” Parascak said. “I’ve been focusing on strength, for sure.”

In the off-season, Parascak trained in Calgary alongside NHLers Jake DeBrusk, Dylan Holloway and Morgan and Conor Geekie. Midway through the summer, he donned the maple leaf for the first time as part of Team Canada at the World Junior Summer Showcase.

Parascak, 19, believes the challenges the Cougars faced last season will set the stage for success. “Just that experience of needing to be ready every night and trying to be a little bit more consistent throughout the season,” he said. “We had some lapses. We had a lot of young guys last year, too, who will learn from that. Hopefully flip the page and go for a good playoff push this year.” H

JAMES DOYLE/PRINCE GEORGE COUGARS

With fewer games on the NCAA docket than in the WHL, Reschny plans to put in extra time in the gym this year.

NORTH DAKOTA FIGHTING HAWKS

UP FOR THE 'FIGHT'

It took a leap of faith for younger CHLers, like Flames first-rounder Cole Reschny, to jump to the NCAA ranks so early. But he's ready for the challenge **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

LET THE RECORD SHOW: Gavin McKenna wasn't the first major WHL star to leave early in favor of an NCAA commitment. And while the top prospect in the 2026 NHL draft will indeed be one of the major storylines of the season when he suits up for Penn State, one of his former 'Dub' foes will himself play a major role at the University of North Dakota.

Cole Reschny, formerly of the WHL's Victoria Royals, committed to the Fighting Hawks in late May, as did his Victoria teammate Keaton Verhoeff. The double-commit sent shockwaves through the development world because, at that point, most of major junior's losses to the NCAA had been players about to exhaust their CHL eligibility or, at the least, who had already gone through the NHL draft. Reschny, on the other hand, had just completed his draft year, positioning himself as a potential first-rounder. "Leaving Victoria was so hard because of all the things they've done for me and how special it's been there – the best two years of my life so far," Reschny said. "I can't thank them enough. But, at the end of the day, North Dakota was the right path for me."

When the draft arrived in Los Angeles, it was bittersweet for Victoria. Reschny went 18th overall to the Calgary Flames, making him the first Royal ever to go in the first round. But he was now trading in the Royals' black and blue for North Dakota green. "That was a long process and something I didn't take lightly," he said. "I felt like going to North Dakota, it gives me the right time for my mind and my body to develop. Yeah, we're playing less games than in the WHL, but I think that's good for me. I'm not the biggest guy, so it's more time in the gym, more time to work on my body and get the right nutrition – and recovery is huge."

At 5-foot-11 and 183 pounds, Reschny isn't small, but he isn't big, either. Nonetheless, he was a buzzsaw for the Royals last year, piling up 92 points in 62 games to lead the team. He kicked it up another notch in the playoffs, going off for a beguiling 25 points in 11 games. Once that was done, he headed to the world U-18s, where his five goals in five games tied him for fourth in that metric and helped Canada to a gold medal.

Also playing on that Canadian squad was Verhoeff, who could go as high as second overall in the 2026 draft behind McKenna. Reschny insists he and the young defenseman didn't commit to North Dakota as a "package deal," but he's still stoked about heading to Grand Forks with one of his buddies. "It's great," Reschny said. "The way he carries himself, the person he is, the player he is, it's so special to watch him. We're going to be living together, so it's going to be sweet. It's going to be a great year, and I can't wait to watch him go through the draft process just like I did. I'll be by his side the whole time. Anytime you have a chance to be around a player like that, you're very lucky."

The Flames feel pretty lucky, too. For a Calgary organization in need of high-end skill, Reschny brings exactly the kind of game the team needs more of now and in the future. "We needed center-ice men," said Tod Button, Calgary's director of amateur scouting. "We talked about it a lot. But we weren't going to reach for it. He has skill, hockey sense, compete, and he's a winner. That's how you describe Cole Reschny."

The skilled teen hails from Macklin, Sask., which is near the border with Alberta and is about a three-hour drive from Edmonton. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that the Reschnys are Edmonton Oilers fans. And while the Battle of Alberta is as hot a rivalry as you can find in sports, Reschny isn't worried about his family cheering against him once he dons a Calgary jersey. "I think they're more than willing to switch," he said with a smile. "It's pretty crazy the way it worked out, but it's so special. H

TOP: KIRBY LEE-IMAGN IMAGES; MIDDLE: LARRY BRUNT/VICTORIA ROYALS

MICHIGAN WOLVERINES

TURN OF MAIZE

A last-minute change of heart will have top 2026 NHL draft prospect Adam Valentini suiting up for Michigan – not Kitchener – this season **BY TONY FERRARI**

ON JUNE 5, THE Kitchener Rangers were ecstatic because they had just received a commitment from one of the top 2008-born players in the world, Adam Valentini. On Aug. 18, the organization released a statement awash in disappointment, saying Valentini had chosen not to honor his commitment and would instead be heading to the University of Michigan earlier than expected.

Valentini's change of heart was a devastating blow to the Rangers, especially because it came just a week before players reported for training camp.

The move blindsided Rangers GM Mike McKenzie. He was adamant that, despite the organization still owning Valentini's rights, the 17-year-old would not play for the team if he decided to return to the OHL in the future.

As recently as mid-July, Valentini spoke with excitement about the prospect of joining the Rangers. He lauded everything from the club's facilities to its history to the competitive roster he expected to be a part of. "I grew up going to OHL games as a kid, so it's going to be fun to play in them this season," Valentini told The Hockey News at the time. "It will be pretty unreal to do it for a team with as much history as Kitchener, too."

Heading into the 2024 OHL draft, Valentini was one of the top prospects available, but he was also clear about being set on playing in the NCAA. That tanked his stock to the point that Mississauga was able to scoop him up with the 13th pick overall. The Steelheads, who had moved down the road to Brampton in the intervening months, then traded Valentini's rights to Kitchener in September 2024.

Staying true to his word, Valentini decamped for the USHL last season to play for the Chicago Steel. He originally intended to stay with the USHL's crown-jewel organization for another campaign, after which he would make the move to the NCAA to join the Michigan Wolverines for 2026-27.

EARLY ADMISSION

Valentini planned to join Michigan for 2026-27, but when a roster spot opened up, he couldn't say no.

All of that changed last November, when the NCAA announced it was amending the eligibility rules for CHL players, allowing them to play college hockey as long as they had not signed a professional contract.

This provided players across junior with the opportunity to alter their original plans and, at the very least, consider the college-hockey development route. It also allowed players who, like Valentini, had opted to play in the USHL strictly to retain their NCAA eligibility to reverse course. "You try not to think about it when it first happens," Valentini said, "but I almost immediately thought about playing closer to home."

With such a positive view of the OHL, it raises the question of what exactly happened.

To start, Valentini expressed he was grateful to be recruited by a program that has become one of the premier organizations in all of college hockey. He noted the wide range of Michigan alums now in the NHL, from established stars like Dylan Larkin and Zach Werenski to young talents such as Adam Fantilli and Owen Power.

Valentini says he's excited to be a part of the next wave. "The University of Michigan can give me everything my family and I wanted," Valentini said. "I am able to play the highest level of hockey possible and continue my education. I want to be the best player I can be, but I want to be a great person as well, and Michigan can help with that."

It turns out the reason for Valentini's late jump wasn't as nefarious as some would have liked to believe. It came down to opportunity.

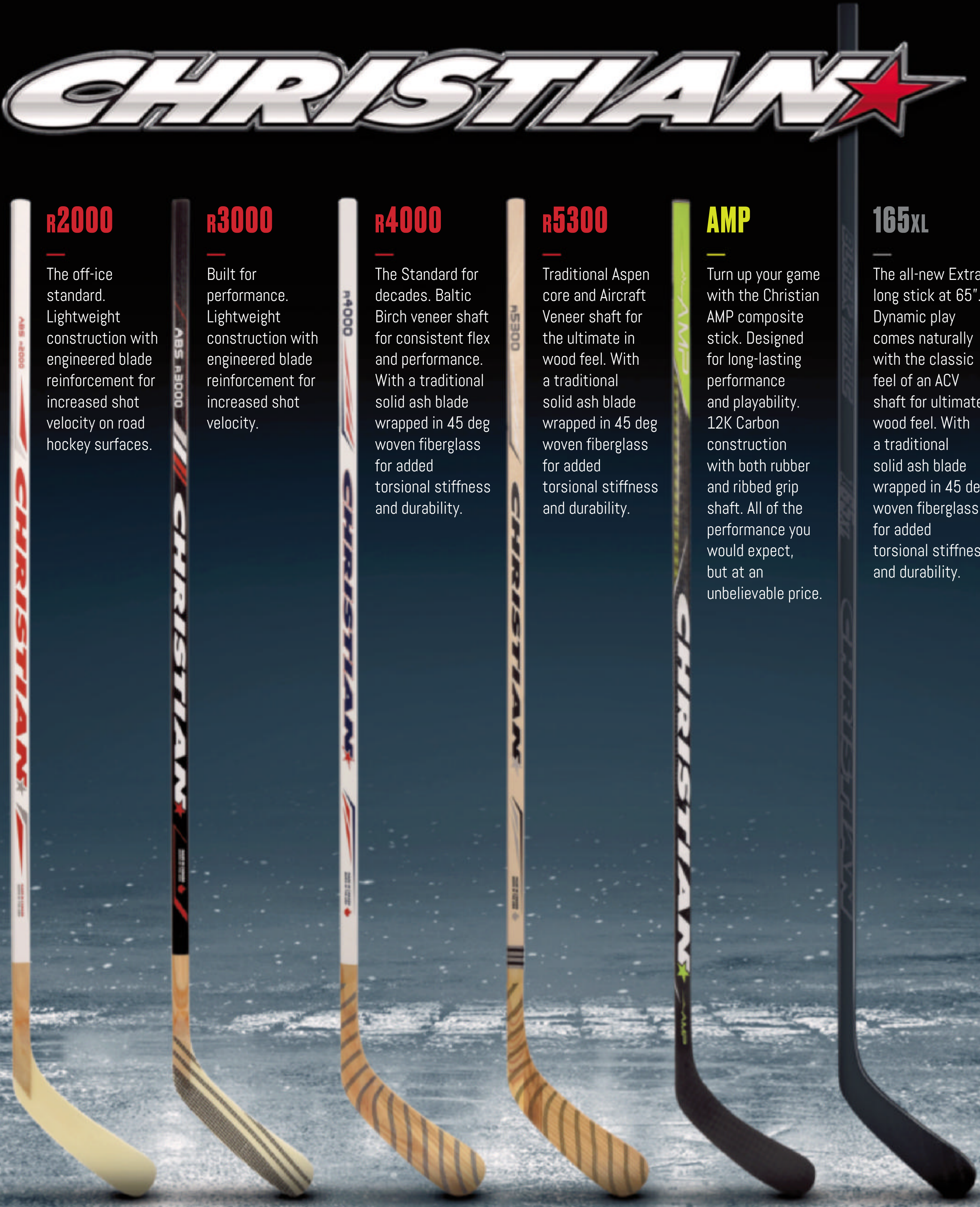
The Wolverines were saving a spot for a player, and when they didn't receive a commitment from that player, they turned their attention to persuading Valentini to come to Ann Arbor early. Who exactly Michigan had earmarked for that roster spot is unknown – despite plenty of rumors circulating – but what matters is who ended up taking it.

Valentini is a top prospect for the 2026 NHL draft. He's projected to be a top 15 selection but could rise based on his play in 2025-26.

He believes he is ready to take on the college game. He knows he will face bigger, faster and stronger competition than he has in the USHL or he would have in the OHL. But a diamond doesn't become such without pressure, and Valentini welcomes the challenge.

TOP: ANDREAS ROBANSER/PUCKFANS.AT; BOTTOM: PHOTO BY CHICAGO STEEL

CHRISTIAN



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FARGO FORCE

ALL 'SPART' OF THE PLAN

Mason West had many options for where he'd go to school – and which sport he'd play when he got there – but the future Blackhawk now sees his path more clearly **BY RYAN KENNEDY**

LEE SNIPES WEST

A fellow football-playing Edina Hornet is a big part of the reason West chose to commit to hockey over football.

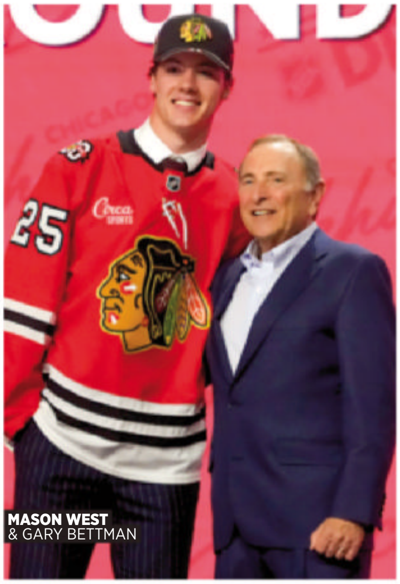
ONE OF THE MOST intriguing talents in the 2025 draft class was Mason West, an imposing 6-foot-6, 215-pound center taken 29th overall by the Chicago Blackhawks. To say that West has been in demand lately would be something of an understatement. Not only did the Hawks trade up to get him, but West was also being pursued by several major NCAA football programs.

And while West is now fully committed to his hockey path, he has one piece of unfinished business on the gridiron: a state title with his Minnesota high-school team, the Edina Hornets. West already won the 2024 state title with Edina's hockey team, but he'll stay in high school for the football season in an attempt to get the extremely rare two-sport double.

It's a practically unheard-of path these days, but the youngster has his reasons. "It's super important for me to play that (final) season because I want to stay loyal to my teammates," he said. "I'm a captain on the football and hockey teams. I want to have the chance to do something special."

The plan is for West to play football in the fall while also skating and doing skills work on the ice. Once the football season ends, he'll head to USHL Fargo for the rest of 2025-26. West spent most of last year with Edina, but in 10 late-season games with the Force, he put up nine points. "There's so much there," said Mike Doneghey, Chicago's director of amateur scouting. "When he commits to hockey – you saw he was one of the highest risers in the rankings once he went to Fargo instead of training for football. He's a hell of an athlete, and he's just *big*. He brings that quarterback mentality to the ice. When he's entering the zone, he's scanning for plays to make, and he's comfortable with contact. He doesn't shy away from that stuff."

While he grew up in Minnesota, West was actually a Chicago fan as a kid, so draft day was extra special. "I was a Blackhawks fan, and my brother was a Penguins fan," West said. "I've always been a 'Kaner' fan and a Toews fan. My dad is from Chicago, so he brought the Bears into our household and the Blackhawks. A lot of Minnesota people don't like it, but I kind of go with it a bit."



MASON WEST
& GARY BETTMAN

West will stay in the Midwest for college, having committed to Michigan State for 2026-27. Doneghey and the Hawks like the choice, since they grabbed one of the Spartans' finest in 2024 when they selected Artyom Levshunov second overall, and they know the program well.

"It was the development part for me," West said. "They have a thought-out plan for me on becoming a better hockey player, and that was important. I'm still a raw player, and there are aspects of my game I can work on. That coaching staff, they're making players better. I look at Charlie Stramel and how he transitioned into a way better player at Michigan State, and I see myself a little like him."

Another, more lofty comparison would be Anders Lee. The New York Islanders captain also happens to be an Edina alum who played both football and hockey in high school. Lee has also been a great sounding board for West throughout the process. "I know him well," West said. "We talked four or five times before I committed to Michigan State, and I'll probably talk to him again. He's a really great guy. It was nice to get advice from someone who went through the same thing."

West said Lee was part of the reason he decided to commit fully to hockey over football, and the youngster was happy to get advice from the NHLer on the draft process and the combine. In fact, there was a *lot* the kid didn't know heading into last season. "I did not know it was my draft year at all," West said. "But I try to make the most of every opportunity, and when it came up, it gave me more motivation to work hard and achieve my dream."

A dream now officially riding on his skates, not his cleats. H

TOP: MARISSA SHIOCK/FARGO FORCE; MIDDLE: KIRBY LEE-IMAGN IMAGES

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BATTLE

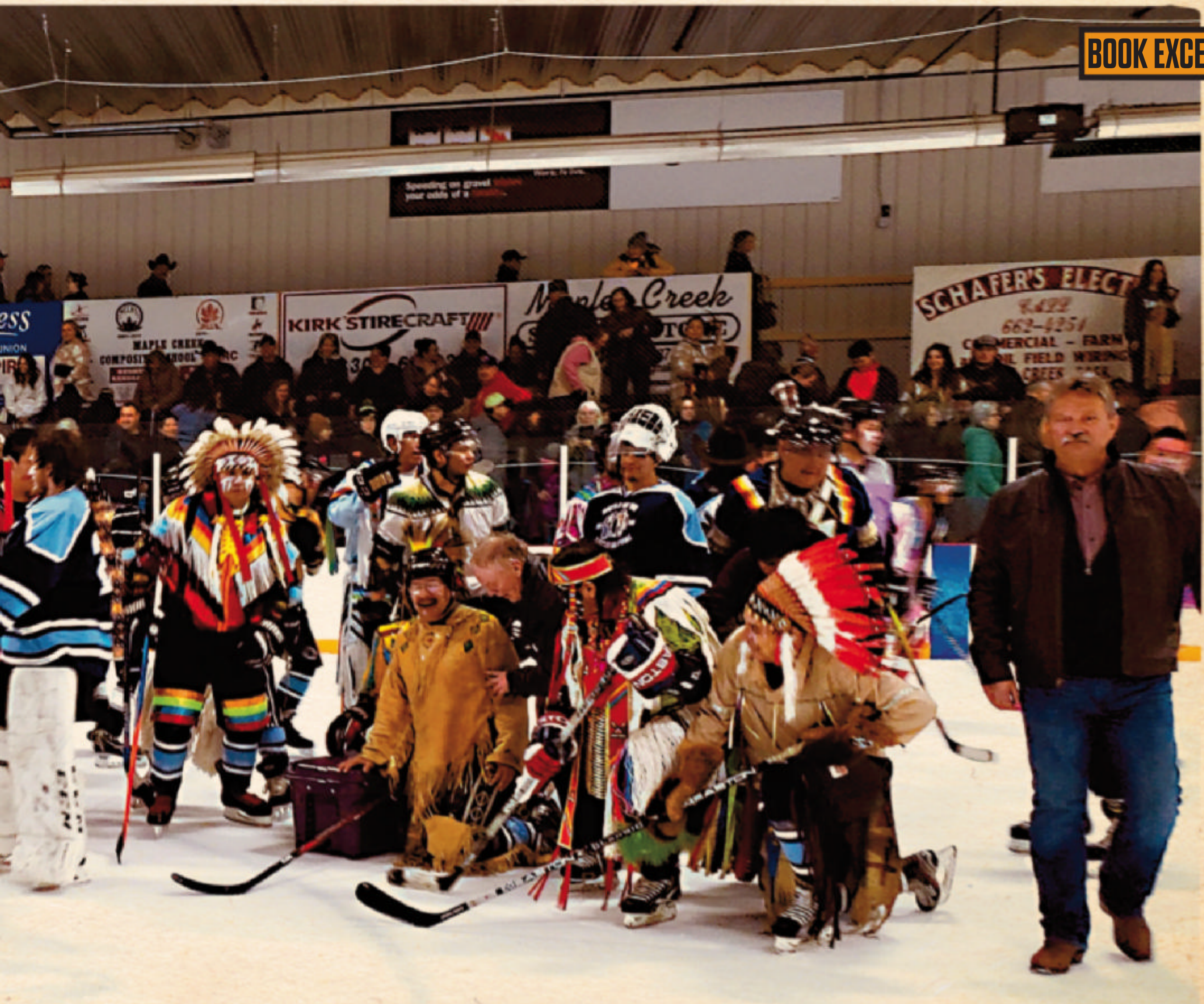
IN A GAME UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN ALL OF HOCKEY, PLAYERS FROM MAPLE CREEK AND THE NEKANEET FIRST NATION MEET ONCE A YEAR TO HONOR A RELATIONSHIP THAT'S LASTED MORE THAN A CENTURY

At its best, hockey connects people, crosses cultures and builds bridges between communities. THN's editor at large, ***Ronnie Shuker****, witnessed this firsthand on an eight-month cross-country road trip through more than 50 hockey towns in Canada – none more so than in postcard picturesque Maple Creek, Sask., and the surrounding majestic Cypress Hills. The following excerpt, taken from his book,* The Country and the Game: 30,000 Miles of Hockey Stories*, picks up Shuker mid-winter in Big Sky Country of the Canadian Prairies on his way to watch the 40th edition of the Battle of Little Big Puck and to take in the annual event's sartorial third period.*

BY RONNIE SHUKER

FROM LUMSDEN, Sask., I head west on the Trans-Canada toward Alberta, meandering through yellow fields blanketed white and on past active and abandoned grain terminals, the mascot of the Prairies. About half an hour from the border, I turn south on Highway 21 and follow it into Maple Creek, a square grid of bungalows and two-storey homes dominated by a terminal on its northern edge,

PHOTO BY RONNIE SHUKER



OF LITTLE BIG PUCK

where the train runs through town. "Where Past is Present," is the motto of Maple Creek, a place where the momentum of its long history slingshots you outside town into the Cypress Hills, along rolling roads through ranch country and all of its implements and residents: farm equipment, old Chevy and Ford trucks, fencing, haybales, irrigation lines and signs for the ranching families ("Bohnets," "Lawrences"), their cattle and fields.

I check into my hotel and then drive to Maple Creek Arena at the edge of town. As the lobby fills up ahead of the big game, the line at the entrance begins extending outside into the blue twilight. Happy faces are stamped on every hand, and cowboy hats bob along the crowd as if they're surfing aloft a throng of fans. One is a cream-colored cowboy hat on a well-seasoned rancher, Tom Reardon. Overtop his black and blue plaid shirt, he's wearing a black leather jacket with "Battle of Little Big Puck" written on it, the name he gave to Maple Creek's annual hockey game 45 years ago at the town's old watering hole.

"The Commercial Hotel," he tells me as we walk outside to talk. "It's no longer in action. It's still standing, but it's empty, the old Commercial."

Away from the growing din of the lobby, Tom pulls out a cigarette, puts his pack on the hood of a pickup truck beside us and recounts the day he came up with the name.

In midsummer 1978, Tom and his friend Nick Demchenko were having beers with their buddy Raymond Anderson from the nearby Nekaneet First Nation. The conversation started with a simple question. Who's better at hockey: the rodeo athletes or the Nekaneet? What began as harmless barroom banter ended with a friendly wager and plans for a game.

"I invented the name at the Commercial," Tom says. "I was in the washroom, making room for more beer when I thought of it. I come out and Raymond and Nick were sitting at the table, and they both were just taking a drink when I said, 'And we'll call it the Battle of Little Big Puck.' Well, they both just sprayed beer all over the table. I remember that plain as day."

After that night at the Commercial, the three of them cut in Raymond's brother Wilbur to help organize the event.

None of them were trying to be visionaries. They were just planning a Sunday afternoon of hockey. They thought the game would be a one-off, on that cold January day in 1979, but it went so well they had another the following year.

With each side winning one game, the founding fathers were fine to leave it at that. “ ‘Well, that’s good, let’s leave ’er sit,’ ” Tom recalls as he pulls on his smoke. They did for a few years. But then players began calling for a rubber match. So after a three-year hiatus, a third game was held. It wouldn’t stop again until the pandemic.

Now 75, Tom was born in Maple Creek, and he’ll die in Maple Creek. He was gone for 20 years when he ran a community pasture elsewhere in Saskatchewan for the provincial government. But he never really left. No one here ever does. He came back for every branding, every weaning, every wedding, every funeral, any excuse he could find to come home.

“I was always a Maple Critter,” he says. “It’s a pretty magical place and good people, and a lot of them, well, they’ve been here forever, like this band here the Nekaneet. The government tried for years to force them to move because of policy and whatnot. They just said no because they didn’t wanna leave the Cypress Hills. To me this band has the most interesting history in all of Canada.”

In the late 19th century, the government forced many First Nations out of the Cypress Hills near the American border and onto reserves elsewhere in Saskatchewan. The Nekaneet stayed, without reserve land or treaty funding. It wasn’t until 1913 that the Nekaneet First Nation received reserve status. By then, they had formed strong relationships with the local ranchers, working alongside them and learning to rodeo.

“Everybody here is a cowboy of some sort,” Tom says.

I thank Tom and go back inside. The lobby is now overflowing, as are the stands. I walk toward the dressing rooms and run into Joe Braniff, who has Dale Mosquito and Bradley Goodwill with him. Joe and Dale are each wearing a black cowboy hat, while Bradley’s thick black hair is pulled back in a braid. All three have on blue jeans and cowboy boots. Both Joe and Dale have played in so many of the games they’ve lost count, while Bradley, a third-generation player, is on his fifth.

To get away from the crowd, the four of us go into an empty dressing room to talk about the game and about the relationship between the people of Maple Creek and the Nekaneet. With few bodies to absorb our words, our conversation echoes off the concrete walls.

“We don’t want to make it sound like we are this little Shangri-La community where everything is unicorn farts and fairy dust,” Joe says. “But for the most part there is that mutual respect. One thing I still laugh about, years ago when the Commercial was still going, I had a friend of mine that came from out of town, and he walked into the bar and he was looking for me, and he said, ‘There were two cowboys, two Indians and a biker sitting at the same table drinking beer.’ He said, ‘What was with that?’ I said, ‘Well, what do you mean?’ He goes, ‘Well, does that happen every day?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, pretty much.’ ”

The Battle of Little Big Puck is about remembering and recognizing a relationship that has carried on for more than a century. Many of the players, on both teams, have known each other their entire lives. Their parents knew each other, their grandparents knew each other and, for some, even their great-grandparents knew each other.

Like all relationships, individual or collective, the people of Maple Creek and the Nekaneet have had their ups

PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER

VETERAN PRESENCE
Dale Mosquito has played in so many Battle of Little Big Puck contests that he's lost count.

and downs over the years, but they've found a way to make it work. The recipe is simple. All it takes is a town, two teams, a hockey rink, a game and a longstanding tradition.

"It's an energy," Dale says. "There's a certain type of energy that gets emitted when people are in for the same cause. And for us, you can't define that. You have to be a part of it. That energy is there. I can feel it. It's hard to describe unless you're there."

Dale uses a Cree word to describe the relationship: *intchuwahm*. He says it means discussing anything as friends without offense but with the mutual understanding of openness for teasing, camaraderie and sharing. It sounds to me like the Cree word for chirping.

"At the end of the game, we have a major handshake that everybody has that camaraderie and that emotion in hand," Bradley says. "It could be the Cowboys beating the Indians, it could be the Indians beating the Cowboys, but at the end of the day we still shake hands. That's the best feeling in the world that, out of everything that we do, is that truth and respect for one another."

When I arrive over Family Day weekend, Maple Creek is celebrating the 40th edition of the game. In all that time, there has never ever been a fight, just a hard-fought hockey game, with a twist between the second and third periods. Some players go back three or four generations, somebody from the Nekaneet working with some rancher somewhere. Then the next generation comes along and they end up working on the haying crew and playing in the Battle of Little Big Puck.

"Never had a fight, and I don't ever wanna see one," Joe says. "But if it was to happen, heaven forbid, it wouldn't be because it's Cowboys and Indians. It would be because it's two Canadian teams playing each other, and it's hockey. It's hockey."

Every year, to make sure nothing gets out of hand, Joe and Dale give a speech to the players on their respective teams before the game. "'If you don't think you can stay in control,' " they tell their teammates, " 'maybe this game isn't for you.' "

"We're now at the point where people are trying to pattern this in other communities," Dale tells me. "And we don't say, 'No, no, no, you guys shouldn't do that.' We offer them a helping hand. 'This is how we do it, or this is what we do, and if you guys want to pattern yourselves after that, by all means have at it.' Because I think the world can use more battles out there."

"Good battles," Joe adds.

I leave the three of them to get ready for the game and go out to find a seat. There are none. I manage to find a spot to stand behind the glass at the near end of the rink, just outside the lobby.

NEKANEET
WARRIORS

THIRD-PERIOD CHANGE
Cowboy gear becomes the uniform for Joe Braniff, second from left, and the other Maple Creek players.

The puck hasn't even been dropped yet and the energy Dale talked about is all around. The rink has a low metal ceiling, with gray, creaky, wooden seats on one side and standing room only, above the dressing rooms, on the other. “Definitely the biggest crowd that's ever been in here,” I overhear someone say behind me. The Maple Leafs and Canadiens are playing at the same time on *Hockey Night in Canada*, but more than half of the town's 2,000 people are at Maple Creek Arena for the Battle of Little Big Puck.

The announcer breaks the wait.

“Introducing first, the Cowboys!”

The rodeo athletes, each of whom has to be a member of a rodeo association to participate in the game, come out wearing white jerseys trimmed in black and gray.

“And now, time for the Indians!”

The Nekaneet, who must either live or have lived on the reserve to play, wear navy jerseys with white and baby blue trim.

Both teams have nicknames like “Chipboy,” “R.J.” and “Rubber Jack” on their nameplates, in memory of Robert Anderson, “a proud member of the Nekaneet band and a proud cowboy!” the program reads.

Maple Creek's mayor and the Nekaneet chief both speak before the game, after which the national anthem is sung in both Cree and English. Then the good battle begins.

Right from puck drop, the energy of the crowd fuels the intensity of the players. Neither team is taking it easy. Although it is a charity event at heart, with strict no-hitting and no-fighting rules, both teams are playing to win. (To keep the game flowing, penalties result in penalty shots.) At one point, there is a flareup at center ice. For a moment, it looks like it might ignite the first fight in the event's history, but Joe and Dale's pre-game speeches win out.

The rodeo athletes jump out to an early lead and carry it into the intermission. While the

PHOTOS BY RONNIE SHUKER

STRONG AS AN OAKES

Larry Oakes is one of just three players who skated in the first Battle in 1979 and are still suiting up.

Zamboni is cleaning the ice, I walk around to the other side. I find the exit door propped open, with players from both teams standing outside, half-dressed and having a smoke together.

Before the start of the second period, I walk over to the concession stand to get some food. In the middle of the lobby, two Welcome to Maple Creek banners hang beside Saskatchewan and Canadian flags, with various Maple Creek Hawks championship banners spread throughout, the town's hockey logo almost identical to that of the Chicago Blackhawks. Near the entrance, beneath a handful of jaundiced championship banners, is a wall of sponsors, both individual and corporate. Encased in glass are the jerseys of two players from Maple Creek who made it to the NHL: Barry Dean of the Philadelphia Flyers and his nephew Zack Smith of the Ottawa Senators.

There are more penalties, penalty shots and flareups in the second period, but this time the Nekaneet control the pace and gradually cut into the lead. Then with the game close heading into the final period, the real show is about to begin.

Before the game, Joe and Dale invited me to come into their dressing rooms during the second intermission. I go first into the Nekaneet's room and find the players in various stages of transformation. Wives, girlfriends and children are helping the players paint their faces and get into headdresses and moose hides.

In one corner, Larry Oakes is sitting on the bench, half-dressed and dripping sweat, still trying to catch his breath.

"It's intense," he says. "You gotta keep your head up out there. But that's hockey. We're Canadians, eh! We're not just gonna go out there and give the other guys the game."

Larry is one of three players from the original game in 1979 who are still playing.

"Where you from?" he asks me.

"Toronto."

"Oh good, ho-ly, they should have one like this over there. Try it. We'll go help you organize it."

Other towns across the country have tried to copy Maple Creek's blueprint but couldn't make it work. I was told most don't even bother because there would be too many fights.

"The politicians will be against it," says one of Larry's teammates.

"Yeah, this would never fly in Toronto," I say.

That is when Dale, who's put his cowboy hat back on, pipes in to the conversation.

"That's where it's needed,' he says. "Maybe that's where it's needed."

I go into the rodeo athletes' dressing room and find the players putting on their best western wear. Most are wearing flannel shirts and cowboy hats, but a few have added chaps into the mix, while one is wearing a buffalo jacket given to his grandfather from the North-West Mounted Police, precursor to the RCMP. In previous years, some have gone as far as attaching spurs to their skates.

"How do you guys manage to skate in that?" I ask.

"Horribly," Joe replies.

"We all fall down about four times before we get used to it," adds one of his teammates.

I go back out and stand behind the benches as the players make their way back onto the ice. The score is almost inconsequential. This is what the fans have come to see. Hockey mixed with headdresses, war paint, cowboy hats and plaid shirts. Even the referee, an RCMP officer, gets into the spirit, stripping out of his stripes in favor of a Stetson and red serge.

As the third period gets underway, I can't decide which team has it harder. Picture playing hockey in an elaborate Halloween costume. With the players in their respective regalia, the pace slows. The Nekaneet take over the game and go home with a 13-10 win. Just as Bradley said, the teams line up at center ice to shake hands.

After the game, I go back into the Nekaneet's dressing room to congratulate them on their victory and then walk across to the connecting rodeo athletes' room to see Joe.

"The wheels kind of fell off for us," he says. "We got lots of excuses, and they're excuses. This ain't our first time on this side of the battle." H

SHOW ME THE CARDS

Despite being overshadowed by other major U.S. sports, there were still plenty of hockey cards to go around at the 45th annual National Sports Collectors Convention **BY SAL BARRY**

IT WAS THE LARGEST show of its kind in history. More than 100,000 sports card and memorabilia enthusiasts packed into the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center in Rosemont, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, for the 45th annual National Sports Collectors Convention.

The five-day show, held from July 30 to Aug. 3, is like Comic-Con but for sports fans. And despite being in the U.S. during the middle of summer, the National had a lot to offer hockey collectors. “It’s overwhelming but in a positive way,” said Mike Phillips, executive VP of sales and marketing at Upper Deck. “The vibe here is electric. There are crowds in every aisle, and it’s really been a positive, upbeat, exciting environment.”

This year’s National was the biggest one – with the most dealers, the largest floor space and the highest number of attendees – since the show started in 1980. It featured more than 600 vendors, ranging from mom-and-pop card shops to auction houses showcasing memorabilia pieces worth six figures to industry giants like Upper Deck and Topps.

The show also had a large jump in footprint, growing by more than 100,000 square feet between 2023 and 2025. The National encompassed the entire first floor of the convention center, as well as a portion of the hall on the second floor. Even the lobby was crowded with hobbyists, where they spread their cards out on the floor like a makeshift black market, making sales and trades outside the confines of the show.

Attendance figures for the National are harder to acquire, though. “We don’t release exact numbers, but I can tell you this was the second year in a row we’ve seen double-digit growth,” said Shane Winn, the NSCC’s communications director. “We surpassed our 2024 attendance records well before the end of the conference, with a big uptick in families, kids and young adults attending.”

ICE IS HEATING UP

With hockey’s popularity increasing in the U.S., more vendors are including the sport’s cards in their showcases.

According to Winn, more than 100,000 people attended the show, with Saturday having the most traffic. At times, it got so crowded that it was difficult to walk. And while entry to the convention was supposed to start at 9 a.m., the size of the crowd in the lobby, stretching out the door and down the street, prompted the organizers to admit people 30 minutes early each day. “The overwhelming size of those crowds necessitated letting folks in a little earlier than normal to ease congestion in the lobby,” Winn said. “It was clear people wanted to hit the floors at the first moment possible.”

Of course, the National was dominated by baseball cards – followed by basketball, football and Pokemon cards – but hockey collectors were not disappointed. “There’s a lot of baseball, but it seems like everyone does have at least a little hockey,” said AJ Petrulis, a hockey-card collector from Chicago. “There’s quite a few dealers that have boxes or display cases with hockey cards, but they’re not hockey-specific.”

Only a handful of dealers at last year’s National dealt ex-

PHOTOS BY SAL BARRY

clusively in hockey cards, which motivated Colin Murray, owner of Hockey Card Exchange, to venture south of the border. "There's not a lot of hockey cards available at shows in the U.S., so we decided to set up here," said Murray, who was a first-time dealer at the National but has sold at shows in Canada for 15 years. "Everybody wants to go to the National. It's the biggest show in the world."

Hockey's rise in popularity in the U.S. was another motivating factor for hockey dealers to give the National a shot – or, in some cases, another shot. Diane Bogar, who owns D & P Collectables with her husband, Paul, has sold hockey cards and memorabilia at numerous shows over the past 25 years. They have not set up at the National since 2006, because hockey collectibles weren't sought much during the summer months back then. "You used to see one or two Blackhawks sweaters or maybe someone in a Red Wings jersey walking around at a National," Bogar said. "But now you also see Predators, Golden Knights and a lot of Panthers jerseys. There's a lot more hockey collectors now. There's a lot more kids than before, too."

Added Phillips: "There is such a huge number of younger people here. It makes me very optimistic about both the near-term and long-term future of this great hobby."

Perhaps the biggest drawback for hockey fans at this year's National was the lack of hockey autograph guests. The show had 170 athletes and celebrities signing autographs, but only two were hockey players: former Blackhawks Ben Eager and Kyle Calder. Despite Eager's role on the 2010 Stanley Cup-winning team and Calder being a bright spot during the Hawks' darkest days, neither was a huge draw for hockey fans. Upper Deck also had the Vegas Golden Knights' mascot, Chance, at its booth on Saturday, signing autographs and posing for photos with fans.

EAGER FOR MORE

While grateful for Eager – and Calder – hockey enthusiasts wished there were more than two signing options.

TOP: PHOTO BY NSCC; EAGER+CARDS: PHOTOS BY SAL BARRY

"I am actually quite disappointed," Petrulis said. "The last time I came to a National (in 2023), there were also just two hockey autograph guests. There are fans here at the National that are hockey-specific, so if they can get more than two hockey guys, it would definitely be a lot better."

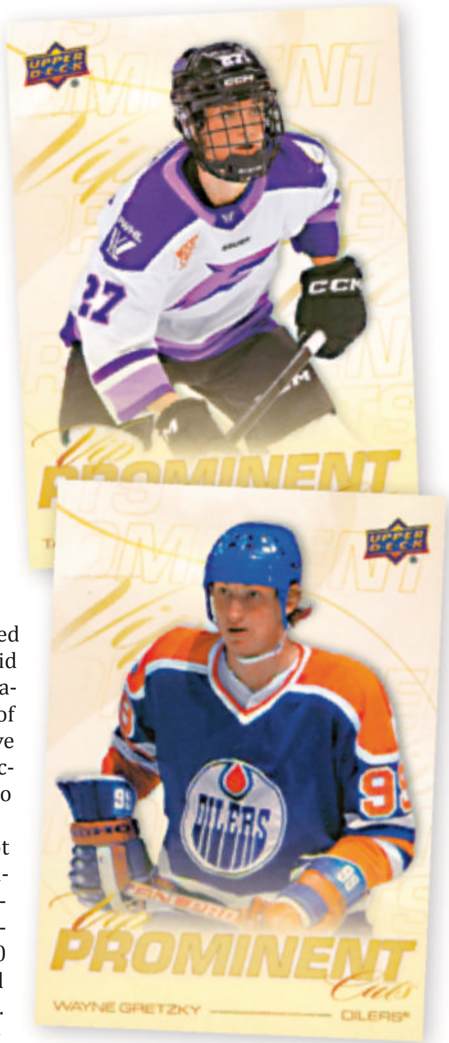
Lack of autograph options aside, the National still had a lot to offer hockey collectors, with many dealers' showcases having at least some vintage or modern hockey cards.

Attendees who bought a five-day VIP pass were given a special five-card set from Upper Deck that included cards of Wayne Gretzky and PWHL star Taylor Heise. Upper Deck also gave an exclusive pack of cards to anyone who bought an unopened box of new hockey cards while attending the National.

Auction houses also exhibited hockey memorabilia available in their current or upcoming auctions, including game-worn jerseys and equipment. But the show-stopper – for hockey fans, anyway – may have been a near-complete set of hockey postcards issued in 1910-11 by Sweet Caporal Cigarettes, which featured hockey pioneers such as Georges Vezina and Art Ross. "People have been really excited about these postcards," said Andrew Aronstein, operations manager for Love of the Game Auctions. "I've had many Canadian collectors visit our booth just to see these cards."

The postcards were not for sale but were available individually via auction, with the Ross postcard selling for $25,200 and the Vezina postcard topping out at $68,400. Those prices make the average Gretzky rookie card look quaint by comparison. "Every corner I turn, there's something that I like," Petrulis said. "If I had the biggest budget in the world, I would probably buy something from every dealer, but unfortunately, I'm not made of cash."

Regardless of personal budget, the National had something for everyone, from those who wanted to sift through quarter boxes looking for deals to those who wanted to spend thousands of dollars on a graded Alex Ovechkin rookie card to those who wanted to complete their vintage Parkhurst hockey sets. "Collectors are spending money and having a great time," Aronstein said. "Everyone just seems really enthusiastic about the way the hobby is going right now." H



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BATTLE-TESTED BUNCH
'Bullet' Joe Simpson was one of many New York Americans with military experience from the First World War.

TRUE HEROICS

A fateful day late in 1925 saw the New York Americans almost die in a train crash, band together to save lives, then play at The Garden that night **BY JOSHUA CASPER**

THE WEE HOURS OF Dec. 19, 1925 portended an uneventful eastbound sojourn from Pittsburgh to New York. Airplanes and automobiles were on the horizon, but most North Americans, including pro athletes, travelled via railroad in the 1920s. Regular folks smoked, dozed or lounged in one of the New York Night Express' spacious coaches, while well-heeled Pennsylvania Railroad travellers slept comfortably in lush Pullman Sleepers under a clear winter sky, shielded from the crisp, cold mountain air.

The NHL's newly minted New York Americans were on board, returning home from a quick jaunt to Pittsburgh's Duquesne Gardens after their much-heralded Madison Square Garden debut, sleeping away the nightmare of their third consecutive loss in their private Pullman. They, like the rest of the 160 passengers, took little note of the intricate industrial symphony unfolding as PRR No. 32 raced through the Allegheny foothills. Conductor John W. Simpson, engineman William Pyle and firebox man Harry Paschall worked in unison to run Locomotive 3763 like a high-octane power-play unit, the ever-present trill of steel clacking over wood as comforting as the whisps and clicks of a puck sliding along the ice from stick to stick.

With steam and smoke in its wake, the vaunted iron horse emerged from the old Gallitzin Tunnel, eight cars in tow, moving about *60 miles per hour* along one of the steep curves carefully etched into slopes approaching the Altoona Horseshoe, a hairpin turn for rail that remains a vital shipping artery and tourist attraction to this day. Accounts from newspapers and a report from the Interstate Commerce Commission tell the tale of what happened next.

William Clark of Denver was enjoying a relaxing journey en route to Washington, D.C., via New York. "I had just roused from a little nap and saw by my watch it was 3:20 a.m.," Clark said. "I lit a cigarette and was just settling back in my seat when the train lurched, seeming to come to a sudden stop."

The exhausted Americans felt it, too. Defenseman Earl 'Spiff' Campbell was sleeping soundly when he hit the ground after being thrown from his cabin. Coach and GM Tommy Gorman remembered being thrown across the car: "There was a crash and then a scraping sound as if we were plowing through a forest, followed by another crash. The lights went out. The train was off the tracks. We thudded along the ties. The car swayed and then heaved over onto its side."

After jumping the rail, the 500-ton steam locomotive dragged eight railcars like matchboxes, coming to a violent halt on its side perilously close to the cavernous abyss below, the embers from its coal box ablaze in the heap of debris. "We might have been scared worse than we were if we had known it was just a few feet from the 100-foot embankment," Gorman said.

With less counterbalance from the jackknifing coaches or a bit more momentum, the entire train might've tumbled down the ravine into a fiery chasm. It was that close.

Crackling flames and shattering glass drowned out moans and screams. The once-majestic train clung perilously to the mountainside in a heap of burning rubble. "When the car toppled over, there was a blaze of fire," Clark said. "I feared the blaze would spread."

While bumps and bruises were "old hat" for pro hockey players, for the first time on record, a cross-check from a runaway train was not hyperbole. Like Campbell, winger Ken Randall was strewn from his cabin and thrown clear across the car onto his shoulder. Fellow winger Charlie Langlois was bloodied and bruised. Captain Billy Burch was cut and had a welt on his stomach. Future Hall of Famer Shorty Green banged his knee, first injured in the war and already smarting from the NHL grind. Goaltender Jake Forbes, expected in net later, was bleeding from his eye. Amid smoldering ruins, that evening's matchup against the Montreal Maroons was the last thing on anyone's mind.

With no light, those who could manage to escape stood in the cold dark of night, while others lay amid the ruins, disoriented and helpless. Deep in coal country, miles from Gallitzin Station, the temperature had dipped below zero.

The bone-chilling cold couldn't faze a group of Canadians. These grizzled vets were homeboys. Half the team played alongside a childhood mate. After seeing far worse during the Great War, many knew how to react amid fire and brimstone.

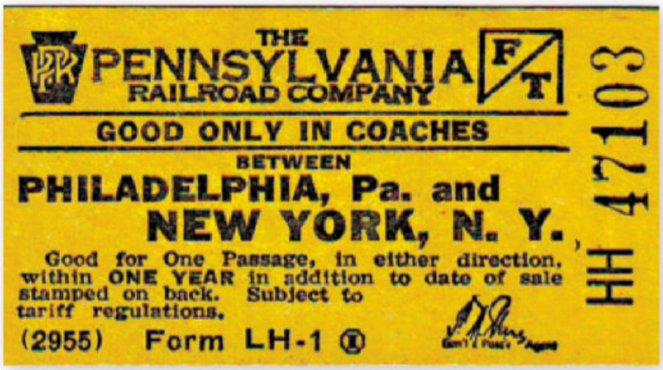
PHOTO BY MANITOBA HOCKEY HALL OF FAME

As a sergeant, Alex McKinnon caught a piece of shrapnel as a machine gunner in the First World War. Green, also a sergeant, fought diphtheria before injuring that knee in combat. Lieutenant 'Bullet' Joe Simpson captained the 61st Battalion Winnipeg Rifles to the 1916 Allan Cup alongside Selkirk, Man., teammate John 'Crutchy' Morrison before heading to the front, where Simpson earned a medal of valor for taking bullets at the Somme and Amiens. Morrison was gassed at Boulogne.

CAPTAIN TO LIEUTENANT

Before heading overseas, 'Bullet' Joe Simpson led Winnipeg's 61st Battalion team that won the 1916 Allan Cup.

They became point men, bounding into action. Joe Simpson, Forbes and Randall climbed through broken windows to rescue those trapped and wounded. Thankfully, a small group of coal miners with torches in their kits approached to lend a hand. "Although the New York team suffered minor injuries, they took an active part in the rescue work," Gorman said.



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Gorman remembered that winger Edmond Bouchard was the first to rush toward the engine, trailing the muffled screams that seemingly came from nowhere. Gorman and trainer Jimmy Smith followed behind into the shadowy wilderness and soon heard the cries. "Don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

Just before they hit the embankment's edge, they found the source. Blinded by ash and fire, Pyle, the engineer, and Paschall, the firebox man, desperately clung to one another, their hands tightly clasped together. Their faces charred and blackened with soot, they were pleading for dear life when providence struck. "A porter helped us carry Pyle and Paschall to the rear car, where we administered first aid," Gorman said. "In the meantime, other members of our team were hopping like flies on the wreckage, pulling out the injured."

As the miners shone their torches, Smith cut smoldering clothes off the unrecognizable crewmen. A few minutes was like an eternity. As the burning wreck was extinguished, new fires were lit in earnest to keep warm. Among the stranded was a mother cradling her crying baby in the freezing nighttime air. "It was very dark," Clark said. "It seemed like an awfully long time until rescuers arrived, but I guess it wasn't long."

When interviewed weeks later, neither Pyle nor Paschall could remember a thing. Eventually, a train came to take the seriously injured to Altoona Hospital. Bennie Hess, a Stanford graduate doing his master's degree at Pittsburgh's Mellon, died in the hospital, the only fatality among 33 injured. It was the second crash for conductor Simpson, who was unscathed in the fifth car. The ICC report blamed the crash on speeding, but Simpson returned to work and crashed two more trains, one in the same spot. Fatal accident No. 4 made national news.

The players eventually boarded a train in Philadelphia. Forced to stand the whole way, they headed back to New York and finally reached Penn Station at 3:30 that afternoon. They were battered, bruised and exhausted – but alive. Many assumed that evening's game against Montreal would be postponed. When the Canadian press asked about their injuries, Billy Burch wired a one-line reply: "We were not injured."

After a one-hour delay – they took a brief nap at the Hotel Claridge – the Americans skated onto Madison Square Garden ice to a rousing ovation. While the 8,000 fans waited, famed MSG announcer Joseph Humphreys gave a lengthy speech on valor and heroism.

Just after the puck dropped, Randall doubled over in pain, his shoulder dislocated, and Langlois gave way to Joe Simpson. Like clockwork, Simpson, a future Hall of Famer, found 'Red' Green with a cross-ice pass, and he buried it. The bench exploded, matching the bedlam from the crowd. Like the first Garden goal his brother Shorty scored, Red's storybook salvo was not to be, whistled offside like it never happened. Hampered and hurting, New York didn't quit.

Somehow, Forbes was sharp. But late in the first, the Maroons' Reg Noble broke a scoreless tie. When reigning Hart Trophy winner Billy Burch tied the game three minutes into the second period, it appeared the Americans had found some magic. It didn't last. As the game wore on, adrenaline gave way to fatigue and pain. Babe Siebert, Nels Stewart and Dunc Munro countered with three unanswered goals for the Maroons to seal their 4-1 win. Burch, Randall and the Green brothers all left the game for good in the third period. They could easily be forgiven in light of the preceding ordeal. "Railroad officials were loud in their praise of the work done by the players," Gorman said.

A New York win would have gone down as one of the great miracles in early hockey annals, but the NHL gives no moral victories, even for heroes. H

PHOTO BY MANITOBA HOCKEY HALL OF FAME

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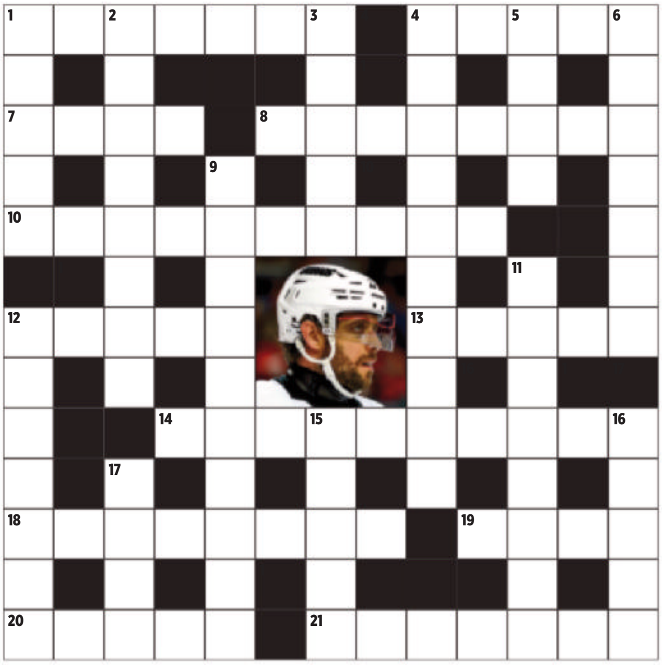
BY LARRY HUMBER



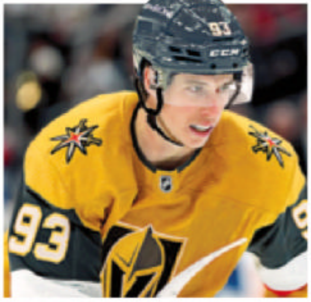
ACROSS

1 Ivy League school attended by Alexander Kerfoot
4 Al the Octopus is this team's mascot
7 Backups
8 Desire or drive
10 He played for 4 Across, is now the team's assistant GM
12 He's believed to be the first player of Muslim faith to hoist the Cup
13 One of the former teams of 12 Across
14 This one-time Nordique now coaches the London Knights
18 '___ Ted' Lindsay
19 Garth ___ tended the net for five NHL teams
20 Longtime Flame ___ Regehr, who won a Cup with Los Angeles in 2014
21 He's GM in Boston

DOWN

1 'The Dominator'
2 Makes future-focused changes hoping to revive a struggling team
3 Matt ___ helmed Wild blueline for a decade
4 Undrafted Zach ___ is now with Vegas
5 Longtime Senators enforcer whose No. 25 now hangs in the rafters in Ottawa
6 Tickets for one
9 Acclaim
11 Finnish winger who bounced from Avs to Canes to Stars in 2024-25
12 He captains the Kings, pictured
15 Blues goalie prospect Colten ___, a 2019 third-round draft pick
16 Boisterous
17 Beat badly

Hockey TRIVIA



> BEGINNER:
Of all the NHLers who will suit up with a new squad for the first time in 2025-26, none will carry a greater cap hit than the superstar pictured above. Who is he?

> INTERMEDIATE:
The NHL undertook the largest-ever expansion in pro sports in 1967, adding six new teams: L.A., Oakland, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, St. Louis and which other?

> EXPERT:
This retired Finnish shootout specialist suited up for nine teams in his 13-year career, including four in 2017-18, tying a single-season NHL record. Name him.

Word SEARCH

Find the names of the furry creatures who represent the foes in the Pacific Division

Pacific Mascots

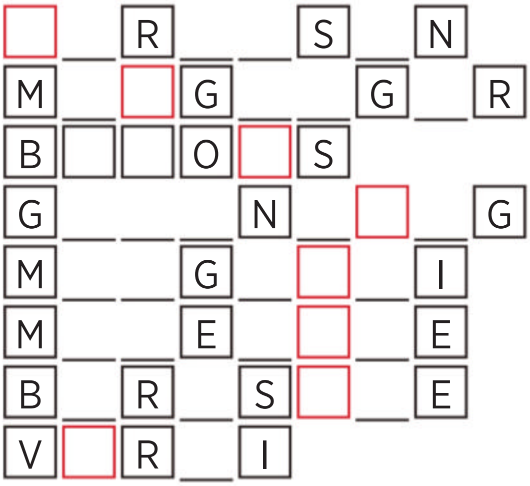
C W E Y Q N E I K R A H S J S
M Q T U G Q I M C X F D T L B
C P Q J N V I F Y E V R A H J
R P E D I V C I E J P H U U M
K B V I W S P M O E S L F W R
T A P C D Y Y R A C H V S F J
P I Q L L Y T N H V K I W V Y
N L M E I T Q U I Y T P H C S
P E E Z W U N I Q Q H P G A D
A Y H Q J T K H S C D K F A D
Y O U B E N V S C T H B X K D
I E D R H Z W I F Z G R A X X
H I T F C K I G E C N A H C V
Q O Y I L U B O C I H I I B B
T W U J L V W G F B C N X V N

BAILEY
BUOY
CHANCE
FIN
HARVEY
HUNTER
S.J. SHARKIE
WILD WING

PUCK PUZZLE

Can your hockey brain bring its A-game? The challenge is on!

Listed here are eight winners of the Elmer Ferguson Award, which honors hockey journalists/media. Fill in the answers, and the name of THN's founder will appear in the red boxes. Hint: he shares a name with someone on this list.



CROSSWORD SOLUTION: ACROSS 1. HARVARD, 4. WINGS, 7. SUBS, 8. AMBITION, 10. KRIS DRAPER, 12. KADRI, 13. LEAFS, 14. DALE HUNTER, 18. TERRIBLE, 19. SNOW, 20. ROBYN, 21. SWEENEY **DOWN** 1. HASEK, 2. REBUILDS, 3. DUMBA, 4. WHITECLOUD, 5. NEIL, 6. SINGLES, 9. ADMIRATION, 11. RANTANEN, 12. KOPITAR, 15. ELLIS, 16. ROWDY, 17. DRUB **TRIVIA ANSWERS:** MITCH MARNER, PHILADELPHIA, JUSSI JOKINEN
PUCK PUZZLE SOLUTION: MORRISON, MACGREGOR, BROOKS, GREENBERG, MORGANTI, (BOB) MCKENZIE, BURNSIDE, VERDI (FINAL ANSWER: (KEN) MCKENZIE)

CROSSWORD: SERGEI BELSKI-IMAGN IMAGES; TRIVIA: PHOTO BY USA TODAY SPORTS

[THE LAST WORD]

WITH RYAN KENNEDY | 𝕏 @THNRYANKENNEDY

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NHL

BUILT, NOT BOUGHT

The explosive growth of the salary cap in the coming few seasons will place an even greater premium on drafting and developing superstars in-house

TYPICALLY, JULY 1 INVOLVES a blizzard of activity as free agency officially opens in the NHL. But this year, I came away wondering what exactly had just happened. A lot of contracts had been signed, sure, but many of the players signing the most important pacts did so with teams they already played for.

Florida locked up Sam Bennett, Brad Marchand and Aaron Ekblad in late June, taking three of the biggest names off the market before they even got fitted with barcodes. The Canucks had to wait until July 1 to re-sign Brock Boeser, but the impact was the same. In Boeser, one of the most tantalizing scorers hypothetically available suddenly wasn't on the market anymore. They also took the chance to lock up Thatcher Demko and Conor Garland, who were set to be 2026 UFAs, the same day.

And not that many teams had a legitimate shot at Mitch Marner in the first place, but Toronto and Vegas killed any glimmer of that dream with a June 30 sign-and-trade that made the gifted winger a Golden Knight for the next eight campaigns.

So, overall, this summer was a bit of a dud. But next summer, you have an all-world team of UFAs: Connor McDavid, Kirill Kaprizov, Jack Eichel, Kyle Connor, Artemi Panarin and Alex Ovechkin, just to name a few. Simply put, the 2026 UFA class could upend the entire NHL...

But *will* it?

Probably not. Because the fact of the matter is, almost all those players will re-sign with their respective teams before July 1. Heck, by the time you read this, someone could already be off the market. The reasons for this are myriad. Most of those players already work for Stanley Cup contenders. Ovechkin, the oldest of the bunch, has played his entire NHL career for the Washington Capitals. And with 'Ovi' having won a championship while also becoming the all-time goal-scoring king, he has no real reason to leave. I would assume the only other jersey Ovechkin would ever wear belongs to Dynamo Moscow in the KHL, should he fancy a post-NHL swan song.

There's another reason we may not see as much movement in the future as we have in the past, however: the rising salary cap. Simply put, teams won't be as squeezed as they have been in the past. The pandemic forced a lot of teams to make difficult roster decisions when the cap went flat – just ask the Toronto Maple Leafs.

But now, we have forecasts from the NHL for the next three seasons, and they are very rosy. We're talking a cap of $95.5 million for this year, jumping up to $113.5 million by 2027-28. The lower limit for that season is projected at $83.9 million, which is $400,000 higher than the *cap* was in 2023-24. Gordie Howe couldn't give you that much elbow room.

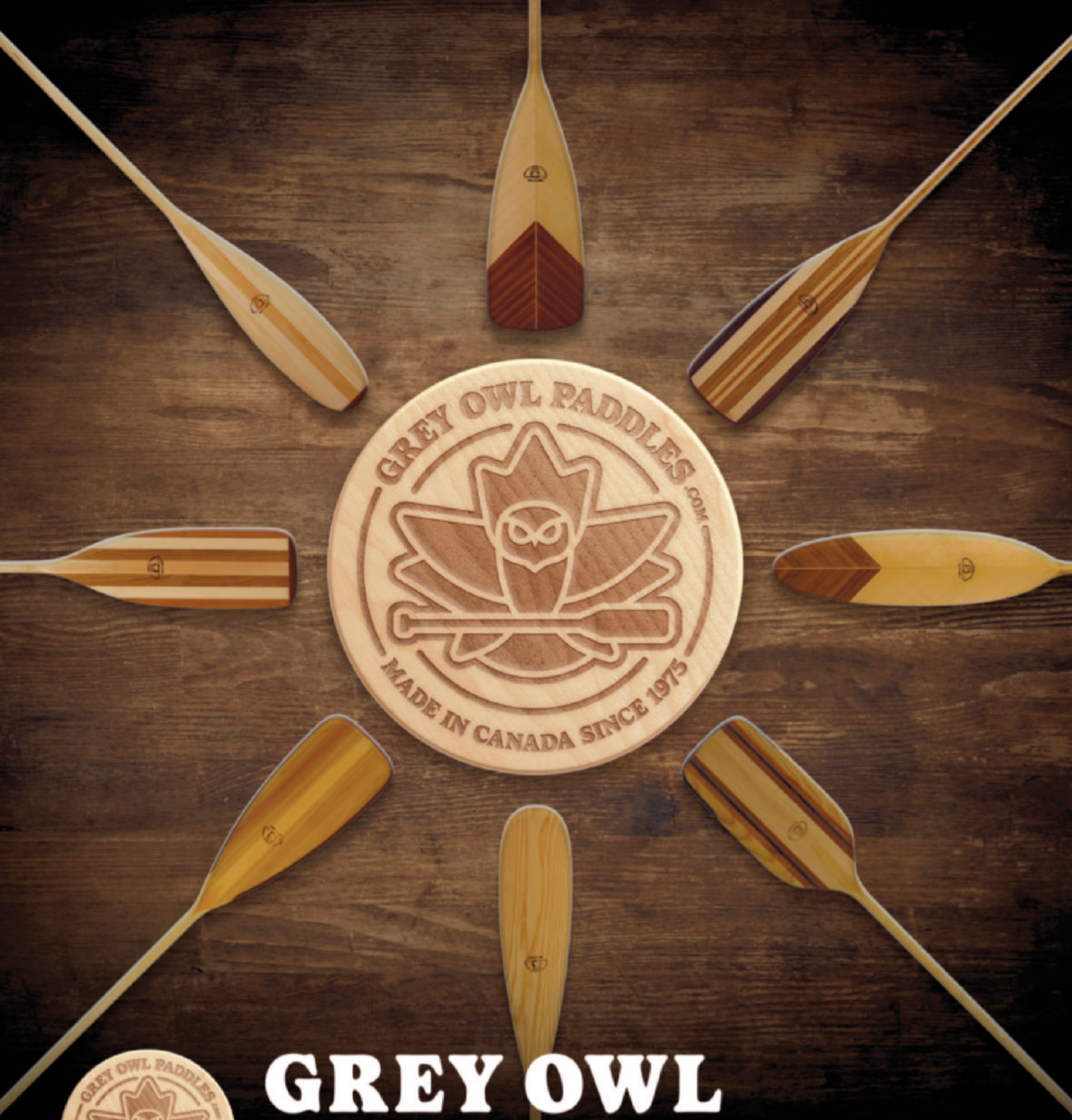
This is all very exciting if you're a fan of the Edmonton Oilers, where McDavid is king and Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard are already locked up. But it is not so exciting for teams bereft of superstars. If this is the new normal, then we may be entering an era in which free agency is kinda dead.

> IF THIS IS THE NEW NORMAL, THEN WE MAY BE ENTERING **AN ERA IN WHICH FREE AGENCY IS KINDA DEAD**

What this would mean is that teams who currently don't have a winning roster will have to draft and develop like never before. Sure, you can trade your way to a Marner or a Mikko Rantanen, but players of that caliber tend to have a major say over where they can be dealt.

So, what we are left with is a ground-up approach, where scouting and player development will be key. When every team can spend enough to keep its top-end talent, the real winners will be those franchises getting the most out of the assets they already have while putting themselves in a position to add those final pieces of the puzzle by having futures other teams crave.

And once you have that foundation, you'd better make sure the supports are there – because players can still demand a trade if the path to glory isn't clear. GMs will be able retain players like never before in the cap era, but they still must build an environment in which players want to play. That will distinguish the winners from the losers. **H**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